

# Rāzī

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*Master of Qur'ānic Interpretation  
and Theological Reasoning*



*Tariq Jaffer*



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## INTRODUCTION



The writings of Fakhr al-Din al-Rāzī mark a momentous turning point in the Islamic tradition. Rāzī was one of the leading representatives of Sunnī orthodoxy in medieval Islam. Imbued with the heritage of Greek learning and inculcated with an Islamic education, he was the first intellectual to exploit the rich heritage of ancient and Islamic philosophy to interpret the Qurʾān. He was also the first Sunnī theologian to develop a methodology that unified reason (*ʿaql*) and the scriptural canon (*naql*), which included the Qurʾān and prophetic traditions. In this book I investigate these transformative contributions that Rāzī made to the Islamic intellectual tradition.

Rāzī wrote extraordinarily prolifically in the disciplines of theology, Qurʾānic exegesis, and philosophy. He also composed treatises on jurisprudence, medicine, physiognomy, astronomy, and astrology. According to a calculation by Zarkan (1963), 193 works have been ascribed to Rāzī, and ninety-three of these are authentic.<sup>1</sup> Many of these works consist of multiple

1. This is noted by Ceylan in *Theology and Tafsir in the Major Works of Fakhr al-Din al-Razi*, 13. Rāzī's major works are listed in Brockelmann, *Geschichte der arabischen Literatur*, 1:507; Supplement 1:923. This is not a complete inventory, however. For a brief description of some of these works, see "Fakhr al-Din al-Razi" in *Encyclopedia of Islam* (second edition), 2:751–755 (G. Anawati).

volumes. Rāzī's commentary on the Qur'ān, for example, is published in thirty-two volumes and comprises approximately ten thousand pages. Some of Rāzī's major works engendered commentaries, which then became the subject of further commentaries. But despite Rāzī's significance as a thinker, none of his major works has been critically edited. Indeed, some of his major works have not even been published. This is remarkable because Rāzī's influence in the post-classical Islamic tradition (ca. 1200–1900) was unparalleled. After his death in 606/1210, Rāzī's works became standard textbooks in Islamic institutions of higher learning in Rāzī's immediate environs of Iran, Iraq, and Central Asia, and also in India, North Africa, and Malaysia and Indonesia.<sup>2</sup> Rāzī's commentary on the Qur'ān, too, greatly influenced Baiḍāwī's d. 716/1316 Qur'ān commentary, which is still one of the core textbooks within the religious curriculum at the Azhar, the foremost center of learning in the Sunnī world.<sup>3</sup> Rāzī's works of philosophy and theology (and the commentarial tradition that they engendered) are part of the curriculum of contemporary Shī'ī institutions of higher learning (*madāris*) in Qom (Iran).<sup>4</sup> Scholars are just now beginning to situate Rāzī's system of thought in relation to the so-called classical tradition of Islam (ca. 800–1200) and to assess his influence on the post-classical Islamic tradition (ca. 1200–1900). And they are just now beginning to assess the influence that Rāzī's theological works (especially his compendium, the *Muḥaṣṣal*) exerted on Eastern Christianity.<sup>5</sup>

Western scholars did not turn their attention to Rāzī until the early twentieth century. In 1912 Max Horten published *Die philosophischen Ansichten von Razi und Tusi*. This work is a paraphrase of Rāzī's *Muḥaṣṣal*, a theological

2. Rāzī's influence on the Maghrib and Malaysia is noted by Setia in "The Theologico-Scientific Research Program of the Mutakallimūn," 134n.

3. On the Azhar, see "Azhar, Al-," in *Encyclopedia of Islam* (second edition), 1: 813–821 (J. Jomier). That Baiḍāwī's Qur'ān commentary forms part of the curriculum at the Azhar is noted in the article, "Baiḍāwī, Al-," in *The Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam* (H. A. R. Gibb and J. H. Kramers); on Baiḍāwī, see "Bayḏāwī, Nāṣer-al-dīn," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (E. Kohlberg), 4:15-17.

4. Mottahedeh, "Traditional Shī'ite Education in Qom," in *Philosophers on Education: New Historical Perspectives*, 449–454.

5. On the reception of Rāzī's *Muḥaṣṣal* in Eastern Christianity, see now Schwarb, "The 13th Century Copto-Reception of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī: Al-Rashīd Abū l-Khayr Ibn al-Ṭayyib's *Risālat al-Bayān al-aẓhar fī l-radd 'alā man yaqūlu bi-l-qadā' wa-l-qadar*, 143–169; Takahashi, "Reception of Islamic Theology among Syriac Christians in the Thirteenth Century: The Use of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī in Barhebraeus' *Candelabrum of the Sanctuary*," 179–192.

compendium that integrates the ancient and Islamic philosophical tradition into Islamic theology. In the same year Ignaz Goldziher published “Aus der Theologie des Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī.”<sup>6</sup> In this brief but important article Goldziher argued that Rāzī was a highly original and independent thinker whose system of thought warranted sustained attention. He hypothesized that the Muʿtazila—who gave primacy to reason (as opposed to revelation) as a source of knowledge in classical Islam—exercised a considerable influence on Rāzī’s theology. He also suggested that Rāzī willingly abandoned some of Ashʿarī’s teachings in favor of Muʿtazilite positions. Writing some twenty-five years later, Paul Kraus (1937) published a short piece that signaled the importance of Rāzī’s autobiography, in which Rāzī details the debates he held as an itinerant theologian in Transoxiana. These debates were later translated (and commented on) by Fathallah Kholeif (1966), who also compiled a handlist of Rāzī’s works and cross-referenced them with bio-bibliographical literature and manuscript catalogues.<sup>7</sup>

In the 1960s Western scholars made the first serious attempts to analyze Rāzī’s theology and its philosophical foundations. In his monumental work, *Die Erkenntnislehre des ʿAḍudaddīn al-Īcī* (1967), Josef van Ess translated and analyzed the first book of Ījī’s d. 756/1356 logic and epistemology. Ījī stands within the genealogical tradition of Ashʿarism, and the structure and substance of his theological works owe a substantial debt to Rāzī’s works, especially the *Muḥaṣṣal*. Van Ess detailed the profound influence of Greek and Arabic logic on late Ashʿarite theology, and he explicated the process through which Muslim theologians consolidated Hellenistic logic and epistemology into their system of thought.<sup>8</sup>

At the beginning of the twenty-first century Robert Wisnovsky provided further evidence of the immense role that Rāzī played in the post-classical tradition. By sifting through Carl Brockelmann’s *Geschichte der arabischen Litteratur*, he produced a partial list of post-classical commentaries on theological works, including post-classical commentaries on Rāzī’s works. Some of these commentaries were written by scholars working within institutions

6. Goldziher, “Aus der Theologie des Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī,” 213–247.

7. Kholeif, *A Study on Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī and His Controversies in Transoxiana*.

8. Van Ess, *Die Erkenntnislehre des ʿAḍudaddīn al-Īcī*. More recent scholarship in this area has been carried out by Madelung, “Al-Taftāzānī und die sunnitschen Philosophie,” 227–236.

of learning (*madāris*), and they confirm that Rāzī's influence persisted into the nineteenth century.<sup>9</sup> In several additional articles, Wisnovsky analyzes the complex process through which Muslim theologians, including Rāzī, assimilated Avicennian philosophy into Islamic theology.<sup>10</sup> These articles are the first to use Abdelhamid Sabra's narrative of appropriation and naturalization (originally intended to describe the assimilation of science into medieval Islam) to explain the "Hellenization" of Islamic theology.<sup>11</sup>

The beginning of the twenty-first century also witnessed major contributions to the study of Rāzī's ethics and logic. Ayman Shihadeh's recent work, *The Teleological Ethics of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī* (2006), reaches widely and deeply into Rāzī's published and unpublished works to analyze his ethics and to position his views in relation to the Mu'tazila and the philosophical tradition.<sup>12</sup> The articles by Tony Street and Khaled El-Rouayheb (and most recently Bilal Ibrahim) illuminate the influence of Rāzī's logic in the

9. Wisnovsky, "The nature and scope of Arabic philosophical commentary in post-classical (ca. 1100–1900 AD) Islamic intellectual history: Some preliminary observations," 149–191. The point that Avicennian philosophy entered Muslim institutions of learning through Rāzī is made by G. Endress, who supports this idea by documenting chains of pedagogic transmission from teachers to students. See "Reading Avicenna in the Madrasa: Intellectual Genealogies and Chains of Transmission of Philosophy and the Sciences in the Islamic East," 397–415.

10. Wisnovsky, "One Aspect of the Avicennian Turn in Sunnī Theology," 65–100; Wisnovsky analyzes aspects of Rāzī's ontology in "Essence and Existence in the Eleventh- and Twelfth-Century Islamic East (*Maṣriq*): A Sketch," 27–50. Aspects of Rāzī's ontology are also analyzed by Eichner in "Essence and Existence. Thirteenth-Century Perspectives in Arabic-Islamic Philosophy and Theology," 123–151. Eichner examines ontological and epistemological aspects of Rāzī's philosophy in "'Knowledge by Presence,' Apperception and the Mind-Body Relationship: Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī and al-Suhrawardī as Representatives of a Thirteenth Century Discussion," 117–140; Eichner, "Dissolving the Unity of Metaphysics: From Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī to Mulla Sadra al-Shirāzī," 139–197.

11. On the complex ways that Rāzī engaged with Avicenna's philosophy in his commentary on the latter's *Ishārāt*, see now Wisnovsky, "Avicennism and Exegetical Practice in the Early Commentaries on the *Ishārāt*," 349–378.

12. Shihadeh, *The Teleological Ethics of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī*. Reviewed by Toby Mayer in *JQS* 9/1 (2007), 116–119. For a bibliography of Rāzī's unpublished and published works, see Shihadeh, *The Teleological Ethics*, 267–268. The foundational articles on Rāzī by Kraus ("Controverses") and Goldziher ("Aus der Theologie"), as well as Abrahamov's article on Rāzī and prophecy, "Religion versus Philosophy," and Gramlich's article on Rāzī and miracles, "Fakhr ad-dīn al-Rāzī's Kommentar zu sure 18, 9–12," are absent from Shihadeh's bibliography on modern works (272–275).

post-classical period.<sup>13</sup> Finally, Frank Griffel's article on Rāzī's life provides a fuller understanding of Rāzī's *Sitz im Leben* and the chronology of his works.<sup>14</sup>

Rāzī's commentary on the Qur'ān, which he labored over from ca. 1198 until his death in 1210, is the crowning glory of his vast oeuvre. Recent scholarship has shown, in opposition to the views of some of Rāzī's biographers, that the entire *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* was authored by Rāzī himself.<sup>15</sup> The

13. Street, "Fakhraddīn ar-Rāzī's Critique of Avicennan Logic," 99–116; El-Rouayheb, *Relational Syllogisms and the History of Arabic Logic*, 39–69. On the later logical tradition, see El-Rouayheb, "Sunni Muslim Scholars on the Status of Logic, 1500–1800," 213–232; "Opening the Gate of Verification: The Forgotten Arab-Islamic Florescence of the 17th Century," 263–281. On the ways in which Rāzī's logic departed from Aristotle's theory of demonstrative knowledge and science, see now Ibrahim, "Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī and Aristotelian Science: Essentialism versus Phenomenalism in Post-Classical Islamic Thought," 379–431.

14. Griffel, "On Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's Life and the Patronage He Received," 313–344; Shihadeh, *The Teleological Ethics*, 7–11. For initial attempts to establish a chronology of Rāzī's works, see Kraus, "Controverses de Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī," 193–194; Van Ess, *Die Erkenntnislehre*, 61 and 147–148.

15. Recent scholarship has shown, in opposition to the views of some of Rāzī's biographers, that the entire *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* was authored by Rāzī himself. The commentary's authorship has been questioned in modern Western scholarship as well as by the authors of bio-bibliographies in the Islamic world. In his foundational work on Qur'ānic exegesis, Goldziher claimed that the commentary was completed by Rāzī's student al-Khuwayyī (d. 637/1239). Following Goldziher, Brockelmann also takes the view that Rāzī did not complete his commentary. Relying on Ḥajjī Khalīfa, he contends that the commentary was further completed by a certain al-Qāmūlī (d. 727/1327). Recent scholars have mainly followed the views of Goldziher and Brockelmann. Gätje, for example, describes Rāzī's unfinished monumental commentary as a project that was expanded by Rāzī's students. Arnaldez speaks of the commentary as a work that Rāzī began at the end of his life but that was completed by Rāzī's disciple Shams al-Dīn b. al-Khalīl al-Khuwayyī. Goldziher and Brockelmann based their claims, however, on Arabic biographical dictionaries that misrepresented Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a's observation that al-Khuwayyī wrote a "tatimma" to the *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*. In fact, Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a does not subscribe to the view that Rāzī did not complete the commentary, although it is true that Ḥajjī Khalīfa seems to have reached this conclusion from Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a's mention of a "tatimma" by al-Khuwayyī. On this subject, see the lengthy discussion by Gramlich in "Fakhr ad-dīn ar-Rāzī's Kommentar zu sure 18, 9–12," 99–152. Jomier also discusses the question of the commentary's authenticity in his article, concluding that it is likely (but not certain) that al-Khuwayyī (or perhaps another person) composed the commentary on chapters 29–36. See Jomier, "Qui a commenté l'ensemble des sourates al-'Ankabūt a Yāsīn (29–36) dans "Le Tafsīr al-Kabīr" de l'imām Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī?," 480.

commentary has received minimal attention from scholars. This is surprising because Western scholarship, beginning with Goldziher's pioneering work on Qur'ānic exegesis (*tafsīr*), *Die Richtungen der islamischen Koranauslegung* (1920), acknowledged Rāzī's commentary to be one of the richest sources in the *tafsīr* tradition.<sup>16</sup>

It is also surprising because Muslim intellectuals of various stripes relied on the commentary in innumerable ways and extended the exegetical methods and ideas that Rāzī had introduced. In Iran, Nizām al-Dīn al-Nishāpūrī (d. ca. 730/1330) composed a commentary on the Qur'ān that drew heavily from Rāzī's scientific explanations of it.<sup>17</sup> In South Asia, Ashraf Jahangir Simnānī (d. 808/1405) drew from the Ṣūfī material in Rāzī's commentary. He pursued Rāzī's Ṣūfī discussion on miracles with an interlinear Persian translation.<sup>18</sup> As noted by Adi Setia, the *tafsīr* of the Meccan-based Javanese scholar al-Nawawī al-Bantanī al-Jāwī (d. 1314/1897) was greatly influenced by Rāzī's *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*.<sup>19</sup> Even the great Traditionalist Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328), who opposed Rāzī's rationalistic tendencies and sought to undermine them, fell under Rāzī's influence and responded to his interpretations of the Qur'ān.<sup>20</sup> He, too, recognized the diversity of exegetical threads and plurality of ideas

16. Goldziher, *Die Richtungen der islamischen Koranauslegung*, 122–123. For more recent scholarship on developments within the genre of *tafsīr*, see Elias, “Ṣūfī *tafsīr* Reconsidered: Exploring the Development of a Genre,” 41–55. For an overview of *tafsīr* studies, see Rippin (1982), “The present status of *tafsīr* studies,” 224–238.

17. That Nishāpūrī's scientific exegesis of the Qur'ān is heavily influenced by Rāzī's methodology is illustrated by Morrison in *Islam and Science: The Intellectual Career of Nizam al-Din al-Nisaburi* (2007). More recently Morrison (2013) argues that Baiḍāwī's Qur'ān commentary (which owes a substantial debt to Rāzī's methodology) exploits scientific resources within the genre of *tafsīr*. He argues that for Baiḍāwī, the depictions of the natural world that one finds in science can provide knowledge of God and his works; for example, in Baiḍāwī's view, the human perception of habitual occurrences in nature is essential to grasping the Qur'ān's understanding of miracles. For further examples see Morrison, “Natural Theology and the Qur'an,” 1–22. On the Qur'ānic paradigms of sciences that are treated in *tafsīr*, see Dallal, *Islam, Science, and the Challenge of History*, 117–129.

18. Ashraf Jahangir Simnani, *Lata'if-i Ashrafi—malfūzat*. Publ. Dār Maṭba' Nsrat al-mataba'-i Dihli, 124–125. On *malfūzāt* see Steinfels, *Knowledge before Action*, passim. For an example of the Ṣūfī elements in Rāzī's work, see Gramlich's translation of Rāzī's commentary on sura 18, 9–12; “Fakhr ad-Din ar-Razi's Kommentar zu Sure 18, 9–12.”

19. A. Setia, “The Theologico-Scientific Research Program of the Mutakallimūn,” 144.

20. See, for example, Ibn Taymiyya's comments in *Dar' ta'āruḍ al-'aql wa-l-naql*, 4:76.



that Rāzī had woven into his commentary. His well-known quip about the work, “it contains everything but *tafsir*” was a response to the plurality of modes of interpretation and the extensive scope of material that Rāzī introduced into Sunnī *tafsir*.<sup>21</sup>

Michel Lagarde’s recent substantial monograph, *Les secrets de l’invisible: Essai sur le Grand Commentaire de Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī* (2008), is the only major book-length study on Rāzī’s Qur’ān commentary.<sup>22</sup> In his synchronic study of Rāzī’s work, Lagarde focuses on Rāzī’s view that the Qur’ān’s beauty is traceable to six qualities. These are the Qur’ān’s profound secrets (*al-asrār*), rich allusions (*al-ishārāt*), subtleties (*al-daqa’iq*), remarkable nuances (*al-laṭā’if*), order (*al-tartīb*), and arrangement (*al-naẓm*).<sup>23</sup> By investigating Rāzī’s commentary using these categories, Lagarde stresses the internal and organic unity of Rāzī’s system of thought in *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*.<sup>24</sup>

My approach to Rāzī’s Qur’ān commentary differs substantially from Lagarde’s. I maintain that in order to appreciate Rāzī’s innovations within the *tafsir* tradition, and to understand the complexity of his thought, it is essential to examine his methods and ideas in relation to the intellectual currents of his milieu and to understand the way he opportunistically aligns himself with various intellectual trends. Thus I pay special attention to the ways that Rāzī responds to the rationalistic program of Muʿtazilite theology and to the Hellenistic worldview of the Aristotelian-Avicennian philosophical tradition, as well as to the ways that he responds to intellectuals within his own genealogical tradition of Ashʿarism. I also maintain that it is essential

21. “When the shaykh Ibn Taymiyya spoke about Rāzī’s Qur’ān commentary, he said that it includes everything except Qur’ān commentary. And Subkī responded that this is not the case; rather, it includes everything along with Qur’ān commentary” (Ṣafādī, *Kitāb al-wāfi bi-l-wafāyāt*, 4:254).

22. Lagarde, *Les secrets de l’invisible*. Mention should also be made of the following works: Shalahudin Kafrawi, *Methodology of Qur’ānic Interpretation. Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī’s Exegetical Principles*; Setia, “The Theologico-Scientific Research Program of the Mutakallimūn,” 3 (2005), 127–152; Ceylan, *Theology and Tafsir in the Major Works of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī*, 15–48; Pourjavady, “Fahr-e Rāzī und Gazzālī’s Mishkāt al-anwār (Lichternische),” 49–70; Arnaldez, Roger. *Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī: Commentateur du coran et philosophe*.

23. Lagarde, *Les secrets de l’invisible*, 22.

24. I analyze Lagarde’s *Les secrets de l’invisible* in a review article. See *Journal of Qur’ānic Studies* 15.3 (2013), 267–280.



to examine *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* in relation to Rāzī's other works. I therefore pay special attention to the process through which Rāzī transfers methods, principles, and ideas across disciplinary boundaries—from his works of philosophy (*falsafa*) and theology (*kalām*) into the canon of Sunnī *tafsīr*.

The central theses of this book may be best understood in relation to Sabra's narrative that explains the assimilation of the ancient sciences into medieval Islam. Sabra divides this process into three historical stages. In the first phase, which dates to the ninth century, ancient philosophical and scientific texts were imported into medieval Islam as a result of a movement to translate ancient Greek texts (as well as other texts) into Arabic. By means of what Sabra calls an act of "appropriation," ancient philosophical and scientific texts were imported into medieval Islam, translated into Arabic, and made available for study, critique, refinement, and elaboration.<sup>25</sup>

The second phase is marked by the emergence of Muslim philosophers who adopted a Hellenistic worldview. These philosophers elaborated upon, refined, and systematized the philosophical and scientific knowledge that had been acquired by virtue of the translation movement. During this stage, Muslim philosophers, notably Fārābī (d. 339/950) and Avicenna (d. 428/1037), also used the resources of Hellenistic philosophy, including its epistemology, metaphysics, and psychology, to interpret religious phenomena. It was during this phase that the *falāsifa* developed a system of thought that competed with the worldview articulated by Muslim theologians (*mutakallimūn*).

The impact of the third historical stage, which dates to the eleventh century, is tied to the development of Islamic institutions of learning (*madāris*).<sup>26</sup>

25. Sabra, "The Appropriation and Subsequent Naturalization of Greek Science in Medieval Islam: A Preliminary Statement," 223–243. The significance of this movement for the history of philosophy, as well as its historical, social, and political factors, have been studied by Gutas in *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture: The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early 'Abbāsīd Society (2nd–4th/8th–10th Centuries)*.

26. On Islamic institutions of learning, see Makdisi, *The Rise of Colleges: Institutions of Learning in Islam and the West*, passim; Berkey, "Madrasas Medieval and Modern: Politics, Education, and the Problem of Muslim Identity," 40–60; "Mortahedeh, "The Transmission of Learning: The Role of the Islamic Northeast," 61–72. See also "Madrasa" in *Encyclopedia of Islam* (second edition), 5: 1123–1134 (J. Pederson—[G. Makdisi]); 5: 1134–1136 (M. Rahman); 5: 1136–1154 (R. Hillebrand). For an introduction into the ways that medieval Muslim scholars approached education, see now Günther, "Be Masters in That You Teach and Continue to Learn: Medieval Muslim Thinkers on Educational Theory," in 367–388. Two related points

Muslim theologians (*mutakallimūn*) of this epoch who were inculcated with Islamic learning, or even formally trained in Muslim colleges, began to systematize Avicennian philosophy into theology (*kalām*). By synthesizing the ancient and Islamic philosophical canon with the system developed by Muslim theologians, these intellectuals engendered a new movement that flourished in Islamic institutions of learning. This system successfully combined two traditions of knowledge to produce a new wave of Sunnī thinking that was the hallmark of the post-classical period. Several major aspects of this process have been analyzed by Wisnovsky, who proposes that the development started with Juwaynī (d. 478/1085) and Bazdawī (d. 493/1099) and that it extends into the twentieth century.<sup>27</sup>

In this book I examine Rāzī's boldly unconventional intellectual project, which marks a pivotal moment within the Islamic tradition. My broad objectives are the following: to explain Rāzī's use of the Qur'ān as a vehicle for his ideas; to explain how Rāzī devises rules and principles of Qur'ānic interpretation by assimilating methods and ideas from diverse intellectual currents—including Aristotelian-Avicennian philosophy and Mu'tazilism—into Sunnī theology and exegesis; to analyze the ways that Rāzī resolves major methodological conflicts concerning the role of intellect (*'aql*) with respect to scripture (*naql*); to chart the process through which Rāzī appropriates

made by Günther in his preliminary remarks are especially worth stressing: The increasing ethnic and religious diversity of major cities in North America and Europe call urgently for a critical and unbiased approach to education. By neglecting the historical trajectory of education in Islamic culture, including its diverse theories of education, the curricula of its religious institutions, and the dynamic relationship between education and piety, we run the risk of occupying ourselves with "self-postulated problems" rather than examining problems and solutions that are available within "stores of historical knowledge" (367).

27. Wisnovsky, "The nature and scope," 153. Shihadeh has recently shown that Rāzī was part of a broader intellectual movement that critiqued the Aristotelian-Avicennian philosophical tradition: "From al-Ghazālī to al-Rāzī: 6th/12th Century Developments in Muslim Philosophical Theology," 141–179. Griffel identifies Abū l-Barakāt al-Baghdādī as an important figure within this intellectual trend; Griffel, "Between al-Ghazālī and Abū l-Barakāt al-Baghdādī: The Dialectical Turn in the Philosophy of Iraq and Iran During the Sixth/Twelfth Century," 45–75. Rāzī's importance for the reception of Avicennian philosophy is pointed out and analyzed by Eichner, "'Knowledge by Presence,' Apperception and the Mind-Body Relationship: Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī and al-Suhrawardī as Representatives and Precursors of a Thirteenth-Century Discussion," 117.

ideas from Aristotelian-Avicennian philosophy (as well as Stoicism and Muʿtazilism) and naturalizes them into Sunnī theology and exegesis. By exploring Rāzī’s complex methodology, I illustrate the various ways that Rāzī unified the *ʿaqlī* (“rational”) and *naqlī* (“traditional”) bodies of knowledge in his theology and exegesis, and I identify and explain the pivotal role that his Qurʾān commentary played in the history of the cross-cultural migration of ideas.

The first three chapters of this book focus on what I consider to be the central aims of Rāzī’s intellectual program. In chapter one I propose that Rāzī forges a new methodology for philosophy and exegesis. By examining the self-reflective remarks that Rāzī makes in several of his major works, I argue that one of Rāzī’s primary objectives is to rid philosophy and exegesis of the uncritical acceptance of knowledge (*taqlīd*). I also contend that Rāzī’s ambitious methodology aimed to set the discipline of Qurʾānic exegesis on a new course by assimilating the entire sweep of Greek and Islamic learning into his Qurʾān commentary. I further argue that Rāzī used the structure of the Qurʾān as a framework to examine issues relating to the complete array of rational sciences (logic, physics or natural science, metaphysics, astronomy, and medicine) and religious sciences (law, *ḥadīth*, mysticism, and theology, including its theories of physics, anthropology, and cosmology); and that this innovative methodology resulted in a scriptural commentary that encompassed all branches of ancient and Islamic learning. By explaining this project I show the breadth of Rāzī’s intellectual ambition—a breadth that was unprecedented in the history of Islamic civilization. In this chapter I also approach Rāzī’s understanding of the Qurʾān’s method by dissecting key examples from his Qurʾān commentary. My aim is to show that one of the ways that Rāzī unified philosophical and scriptural knowledge was to argue that the Qurʾān expresses ideas—even rationalistic ones from Aristotelian-Avicennian philosophy—more perfectly than do the discursive methodologies of theology and philosophy.

In chapter two I continue to probe Rāzī’s methodology by analyzing its rational assumptions and principles. My focus here is on Rāzī’s engagement with his Muʿtazilite opponents. Building on a hypothesis advanced by Ignaz Goldziher in 1912, I argue that Rāzī adopts a strongly Muʿtazilite conception of the nature and role of human reasoning. I show that Rāzī integrates the celebrated Muʿtazilite practice of *taʾwīl*—figurative and allegorical

interpretation of the Qurʾān and prophetic traditions—into his system of thought and consequently into Sunnī orthodoxy. I also show how Rāzī develops this technique by assimilating philosophical concepts into his hermeneutical theory. My overall analysis highlights how Rāzī consolidated disparate ideas to develop a hermeneutical framework for *tafsīr* that fundamentally altered the ways that Muslims approached the Qurʾān.

In chapter three I analyze the way that Rāzī achieved two interrelated objectives that are fundamental to his overall methodology: reconciling the ostensible conflict between reason (*ʿaql*) and scripture (*naql*) by setting the scriptural canon (which includes the Qurʾān and prophetic traditions) on the solid foundations of human reason; and providing a thoroughly logical foundation for his method of Qurʾānic interpretation (*taʾwīl*). The problem of how to interpret scripture when it seemingly conflicts with the conclusions reached by the faculty of reason had consumed Muslim theologians in the classical period. I argue that Rāzī placed this difficulty at the forefront of his methodology of his Qurʾānic interpretation, and I show that Rāzī’s resolution of the difficulty was adopted enthusiastically by Sunnī orthodoxy in the post-classical period.

In chapter three I analyze Rāzī’s effort to set his principles of Qurʾānic interpretation on rational foundations. My focus here is on the manner in which Rāzī’s procedure of reasoning informs his method of Qurʾānic interpretation. Building on Nicholas Heer’s philological work on Sunnī theology, I explain the procedure of reasoning and logical method that Rāzī uses to formulate novel rules and principles of Qurʾānic interpretation. I situate Rāzī’s method of reasoning within the broader arc of the Islamic intellectual tradition, and I explain how he develops ideas that had been advanced by his Ashʿarite predecessors. Further, I identify the difficulties that Rāzī encountered in his efforts to ground Qurʾānic interpretation in rational principles by examining the objections that his various opponents directed at his methodology and by highlighting the way that Ibn Taymiyya, the leading representative of Islamic Traditionalism in medieval Islam, attempted to undermine Rāzī’s intellectual program.

In chapter four I investigate Rāzī’s method of Qurʾānic interpretation by analyzing his expatiations on the Qurʾān’s Light Verse (24, 35).<sup>28</sup>

28. Rāzī interprets the Light verse in several texts, including his magnum opus, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* (“Keys to the Unseen”), *Sharḥ al-ishārāt* (“Commentary on Avicenna’s

The chapter has two aims. The first is to describe the process through which Rāzī appropriates Avicenna's philosophical method of exegesis and subsequently naturalizes it into Sunnī *tafsīr*. To chart the course that Rāzī takes to transfer philosophical methods and ideas across disciplinary boundaries—from Aristotelian-Avicennian philosophy (*falsafa*) into Sunnī theology (*kalām*) and exegesis (*tafsīr*)—I compare the philosophical commentarial texts (*Sharḥ al-ishārāt*) and the Qur'ānic exegetical texts (*Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*) in which Rāzī elaborates on Avicenna's exegesis of the Light Verse. Focusing on Rāzī's treatments of Avicenna's epistemology I analyze the process through which Rāzī integrated core Avicennian philosophical ideas—including the notion of *ḥads* ("intuition")—into the intellectual orthodoxy of Sunnism. I illustrate how Rāzī imparted the voice of Aristotelian-Avicennian philosophy with authority that matched that of the prophetic tradition and the preeminent commentators of the classical period.

The chapter's second aim is to describe how Rāzī corroborates, augments, and refines Ghazālī's (d. 505/1111) allegorical interpretation of the Light Verse. Rāzī reinterprets Ghazālī's epistemic scheme, which employs a novel nomenclature of light; and he adopts an ontology that equates existence with light and inverts the plain and figurative sense of light; and he embraces an allegorical interpretation of Qur'ānic symbols that explains how the intellect acquires knowledge. I show how Rāzī integrates Ghazālī's unconventional methods and ideas into the intellectual orthodoxy of Sunnī *tafsīr*. When I describe this process I focus particularly on the way that Rāzī analyzes the Qur'ānic term *light* in his works of theology and exegesis and on the way that he transfers ideas across disciplinary boundaries—from *falsafa/kalām* into *tafsīr*. By highlighting the Ghazālīan thread of exegesis in Rāzī's works (*Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* and *Lawāmi' al-bayyināt*) I show how Rāzī adapted the worldview of Sunnī *tafsīr* to accommodate an unconventional method of allegorical exegesis and the ideas inflected by it.

Pointers and Reminders"), *Lawāmi' al-bayyināt* ("The Book of Shining Proofs on the Divine Names and Attributes"), and *Asrār al-tanzīl* ("The Secrets of Revelation and the Lights of Interpretation").

My analysis of the divergent—and often contrasting—directions of Rāzī's allegorizations of the Light Verse enable me to draw broader conclusions about his methodology in Qur'ānic exegesis. I contend that Rāzī developed his methodology by liberally borrowing interpretive methods and ideas from various intellectual currents in medieval Islam. This broad-minded approach to Qur'ānic exegesis enabled Rāzī to achieve one of his chief objectives: to give the voices of ancient and Islamic philosophers undisputed authority in medieval Islamic exegesis and to integrate their systems of knowledge into the intellectual orthodoxy of Sunnism.

In chapter five I continue to explore the relationship between Rāzī's interpretive methods and ideas by analyzing his expatiations on an array of Qur'ānic verses that relate to the human soul (*nafs*) and the vital spirit (*rūḥ*). Among the issues I address are the soul's nature, its temporal origination, its relation to the body, its status during sleep and death, and its intellectual and moral perfection. By examining the theological and exegetical texts in which Rāzī discusses the Qur'ānic terms *nafs* and *rūḥ*, I argue that Rāzī adopts an ancient Stoic theory of the soul (which was borrowed into classical Islam by the Mu'tazilite theologian al-Naẓẓām in the 9<sup>th</sup> century), and I argue that he uses this theory to explain Qur'ānic teachings on the soul and to resolve difficulties in exegesis. By examining the theological and exegetical texts in which Rāzī discusses his cosmology, and by paying special attention to the way that Rāzī gives Qur'ānic terms philosophical meaning, I reveal an additional exegetical context in which Rāzī unites Hellenistic and Qur'ānic ideas.

In this chapter I also argue that Rāzī synthesizes Aristotelian-Avicennian and Ghazālīan ideas about the soul's perfection into his Qur'ān commentary, and that by doing so he brings his conception of the soul in Sunnī *tafsīr* into alignment with philosophical ideas about the soul's perfection. To chart the course that Rāzī takes to transfer philosophical ideas about the soul's intellectual and moral perfection across disciplinary boundaries—from *falsafa/kalām* into *tafsīr*—I compare key passages from his oeuvre that cast light on this issue. I examine *Mafāṭīḥ al-ghayb* to identify the interpretive methods that Rāzī uses to illustrate that a model for the soul's perfection is embedded in the Qur'ān's divine logic. By calling attention to the way that the Qur'ān's method of reasoning about the soul's perfection corresponds to the intellect's methods of discursive reasoning within the Islamic philosophical tradition I suggest that Rāzī devised his innovative methodology within

Sunnī *tafsīr* as an alternative to the old scholastic procedure of arguments and counter-arguments that dominated the intellectual tradition during and before his time.

What is ultimately significant about Rāzī's intellectual outlook is that it came to full articulation in his Qur'ān commentary—not within a philosophical text or theological compendium. By using the Qur'ān to express his philosophical theology, Rāzī gave his revolutionary agenda an undisputed authority in Sunnī Islam. It was through the grand synthesis of ideas that Rāzī brought about in *tafsīr* that Rāzī achieved his ultimate objectives: to set Sunnī *tafsīr* methodology on solid rational foundations by devising and instituting logical rules to govern Qur'ānic interpretation; to unify the content of Islamic revelation with the rich heritage of Aristotelian-Avicennian philosophy and thereby confer authority on the rich heritage of ancient-Islamic philosophical wisdom; and to demonstrate the Qur'ān's pre-eminence by disclosing that its method of reasoning coincides with the human intellect's procedure of discursive reasoning and the conclusions reached by it.

## RĀZĪ'S CURRICULUM VITAE<sup>29</sup>

543-4/1148 Born in Rayy. Educated by his father; followed the eminent philosopher Al-Jīlī from Rayy to Maragha (Azerbaijan). Studied theology (*ʿilm al-kalām*) and philosophy (*ḥikma*) with al-Jīlī. Trained as a Shāfiʿite in law and an Ashʿarite in theology.

Traveled to Khwārazm, which had recently witnessed a revival of Muʿtazilite theology. Debated with the Muʿtazilites, but was forced out of the area due to his attachment to Ashʿarite theology. Given the derogatory nickname “the leader among those who evoke doubt” (*imām al-mushakkikīn*) by the Muʿtazilites. Set out for Bukhara, Transoxiana.

Ca 576/1180 Arrived in Bukhara, Transoxiana. Encountered the Māturīdites, the dominant theological school of the region. Traveled through Transoxiana, making stops in Samarqand, Ghazna, and Herat. Composed the “Eastern Investigations” (*Al-Mabāḥiṭh al-mashriqiyya*) and the “Commentary on [Avicenna's] Pointers and Reminders” (*Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa-l-tanbīhāt*).

29. For a more expansive treatment of the chronology of Rāzī's works, see now Griffel, “On Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's Life and the Patronage He Received,” 313–344. A chronology of Rāzī's works is established earlier by Van Ess in *Die Erkenntnislehre*, 67 and 147–148.

- 579/1183 Composed the “Summary on Philosophy and Logic” (*Al-Mulakhkhaṣ fī-l-ḥikma wa-l-manṭiq*).
- Ca 595/1198 Began to compose the “Great Commentary” on the Qur’ān (*Al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*) or the “Keys to the Unseen” (*Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*).
- Ca 602/1205 Arrived in Ghazna, part of the mountainous region of Ghur. Debated with the Karrāmites, pietistic and ascetic theologians who dominated the region and who were supported by the Ghurid ruler.
- 603/1207 Began to compose the “Sublime Issues” (*Al-Maṭālib al-‘āliya*), his last major theological work. Traveled to Herat, where he debated with the Ḥanbalites. Besmirched by the Ḥanbalites.
- 606/1210 Delivered his “death-bed” repentance for having occupied himself with the rational sciences (*al-‘ulūm al-‘aqliya*). Died in Herat (Khurasan); possibly poisoned by the Karrāmites. Nicknamed “*shaykh al-islām*” by his followers.



## FORGING A NEW METHODOLOGY<sup>1</sup>



Scholarship on the Islamic intellectual tradition has recently shown that methods of doubt were rather common in medieval Islam.<sup>2</sup> Gutas argues that “aporetic and investigative” methods were elements of Avicenna’s methodology and that they distinguished his approach from that of earlier philosophers, including Kindī (d. 256/873) and Fārābī.<sup>3</sup> Rosenthal notes that Muslim theologians considered doubt a necessary starting point for inquiry. Abū Hāshim al-Jubbā’ī (d. 321/933) and Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī (d. 403/1013) used various methods of doubt, and Abū Ishāq al-Naẓẓām (d. 230/845) regarded it as a prerequisite to attaining certainty.<sup>4</sup> Frank argues that for some

1. Parts of chapter one extracted from pp. 241–261, Ch. 9: “Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī’s System of Inquiry” by Tariq Jaffer from “Aims, Methods and Contexts of Qur’anic Exegesis (2nd/8th–9th/15th Centuries)” edited by Bauer, Karen (2013). Copyright 2014 Oxford University Press, by permission of Oxford University Press.

2. Langermann points out instances of the criticism of authority in the works of Maimonides and Rāzī in “Criticism of Authority in the Writings of Moses Maimonides and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī,” 255–275. On doubt and the critique of authority, see *Encyclopedia of Islam* (second edition), “Taqlīd,” 10:137–138 (N. Calder) and “Shakk,” 9:250–251 (Reinhart and Netton).

3. Gutas, “Certainty, Doubt, Error: Comments on Epistemological Foundations of Medieval Arabic Science,” 276–289; idem, “The Heritage of Avicenna: The Golden Age of Arabic Philosophy, 1000–ca. 1350,” 86–88.

4. Rosenthal, *Knowledge Triumphant*, 299–308; ‘Abd al-Jabbār, *Mughnī*, 12:185, 501ff.

Ash'arites, doubt was a precondition when seeking rational justification for religious assent.<sup>5</sup>

Within the genealogical tradition Ash'arism, Muslim theologians raised issues surrounding doubt when they discussed *taqlid*. Roughly, *taqlid* means assenting to the beliefs of intellectual authorities—parents, teachers, or colleagues—without first examining the epistemic value of such beliefs for oneself. The way to escape from *taqlid* was to investigate the beliefs of one's teachers and colleagues. This required that one cast doubt on inherited beliefs by examining whether they were grounded in rational probative evidence.

In the eyes of their Traditionalist opponents, the Muslim theologians and their art of *kalām* (discussion or disputation) were often associated with doubt. In the minds of Traditionalists, however, doubt often translated into disbelief, meaning a failure to accept religious doctrines. This is evident in the many stories related about Muslim theologians who, after having spent their lives engaged in theology, turned away from it on their deathbeds and accepted the teachings of the Qur'ān and Sunna out of simple piety or faith.

Arguments against the practice of *taqlid* have a history going back to Ash'arī (d. 324/936) himself. Ash'arī devoted an entire essay to discrediting the uncritical acceptance of authority.<sup>6</sup> As noted by Frank, Ash'arī and his followers discussed the issue of *taqlid* when they explored topics concerning religious assent to the creed of Islam—the belief in God and the divine mission of the prophet.<sup>7</sup> Their discussions focused on the question whether a Muslim could attain the status of believer by simply passively accepting the religious values of his parents or teachers. The vast majority of Ash'arites, beginning with Ash'arī himself, held that “to believe” or “to be a believer” requires cognitive insight and rational justification. Ash'arī holds that in order to qualify as a believer, it is not sufficient to mechanically repeat the elements of the Islamic creed; one must have a certain level of cognitive insight and justification for one's religious values.<sup>8</sup>

5. Frank, “Knowledge and *Taqlid*,” 45. see also the references to Autoritätsglaube in J. Van Ess, *Die Erkenntnislehre*, 45–52.

6. Frank, “Al-Ash'arī's “Kitāb al-Hathth 'alā l-Baḥṭh”, 83–152; “Elements in The Development of the Teaching of al-Ash'arī,” 141–190.

7. Frank, “Knowledge and *Taqlid*,” 37. On Ash'arī and *taqlid*, see also Frank, *Elements*, 148–153.

8. Frank, “Knowledge and *Taqlid*,” 39.

Ash‘arī’s followers also oppose *taqlīd*. They hold that it is unacceptable to be in a psychological state in which one acquiesces to the beliefs of others, including one’s own teachers. They propose that in order to avoid falling into such a state, it is necessary to justify religious beliefs using rational probative evidence. Bāqillānī, for example, juxtaposes *taqlīd* with rationally probative evidence and considers the latter a prerequisite for assent to religious belief. He asserts, “I do not think that *taqlīd* has any valid function with regard to the basic dogmas of Islam; what is to be followed is the rationally probative evidence, not the fellows of one’s own school.”<sup>9</sup>

Juwaynī, who falls within the next generation of Ash‘arites, also opposes *taqlīd*. He stresses that a believer can avoid falling into the state of *taqlīd* by using rational probative evidence to examine his religious values. Juwaynī aims to ensure that the core doctrines of Islamic theology are premised on rationally probative evidence and conclusive proofs. He thus sees the opposition to *taqlīd* as fundamental to his overall methodology. In the opening remarks to *Kitāb al-Irshād* he claims that his work—unlike preceding books in the tradition—follows a method that allows for “definitive proofs” (*al-adilla al-qīṭa‘iyya*) and “rational argumentation” (*al-qaḍāyā al-‘aqliyya*).<sup>10</sup>

Ghazālī shifts the framework of *taqlīd* from the cognitive act of religious assent to more general issues about the passive assent to beliefs that one inherits from authorities.<sup>11</sup> He distinguishes several types of unreserved assent based on *taqlīd*, the highest of which is based on presumed authority. In this case a person “assents without reservation because of the esteem in which he holds those from whom he learned the basic elements of his Belief, chiefly his parents and his teachers and those whose opinions and judgments they respect.”<sup>12</sup> In his autobiography, too, Ghazālī rejects *taqlīd* as a method of attaining truth, since it prevents one from assenting to a religious belief on

9. Frank, *Elements*, 149.

10. Juwaynī, *Irshād*, 5. The juxtaposition of *taqlīd* and rationally probative evidence is also characteristic of Māturīdī (d. 333/944), who, like Juwaynī, considered the latter a remedy to the former. He points to *taqlīd* as an obstacle to the attainment of correct religious beliefs and claimed to rid theology of it through the use of rationally probative evidence.

11. 208. Ghazālī raises this issue in the *Munqidh* and the *Iljām*, as well as other works. On this subject, see the foundational article by Frank, “Al-Ghazālī on *Taqlīd*. Scholars, Theologians, and Philosophers,” 207–252; idem, “Knowledge and *Taqlīd*,” 208–253.

12. Translated and cited by Frank in “Al-Ghazali on *Taqlid*,” 221.

the basis of rational evidence that one has examined for oneself. The above evidence corroborates the thesis that theologians from Ash‘arī to Ghazālī favored the position that *taqlīd* was unacceptable. To be in a state in which one accepts a belief without knowing its epistemic value was contrary to the basic teachings of the classical Ash‘arite tradition.



Among Muslim theologians more generally, Rāzī in particular used doubt as a way of attaining truth. This was recognized by Goldziher (1912), who established that Rāzī was given the pejorative label “the leader among those who evoke doubt” (*imām al-mushakkikīn*) by Shi‘ite theologians among the Mu‘tazila. Goldziher also showed that this group considered Rāzī a feisty opponent who tried to undermine their doctrines through the use of doubt.<sup>13</sup> Shihadeh points out that Rāzī emphasized the value of methodical doubt as part of his style of inquiry.<sup>14</sup> Griffel cites an example in which Rāzī employed the tactic of doubt to critique his opponents who defended Ghazālī’s theological positions.<sup>15</sup>

Rāzī adopts the classical Ash‘arite position that rejects the passive and uncritical acceptance of knowledge in theology. Evidence of this comes from Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī (d. 672/1274), one of the many philosophers who commented on one of Rāzī’s major works of theology, the *Muḥaṣṣal*, two generations after his death.<sup>16</sup> When Ṭūsī introduces Rāzī’s *Muḥaṣṣal*, he discusses its aims and reputation. He writes:

13. Goldziher, “Aus der Theologie des Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī,” 223–225.

14. Shihadeh, “The Mystic and the Sceptic in Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī,” 109.

15. Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī’s Philosophical Theology*, 116–120; Kholeif, *A Study on Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī and his Controversies in Transoxiana*; Kraus, “Les controverses de Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī,” 187–214.

16. The *Muḥaṣṣal* dates from the middle period of Rāzī’s career: 576/1180–602/1205 (van Ess, *Die Erkenntnislehre*, 148). As van Ess notes, the *Muḥaṣṣal* aroused the curiosity of Muslim intellectuals of various stripes. Ibn Taymiyya, Rāzī’s greatest opponent, composed a refutation of it in a work that is no longer extant. He refers to this work in his *Dar‘* (1:22). Ibn Taymiyya’s refutation of the work, as well as the many references to the *Muḥaṣṣal* in his other works, indicate that he must have considered the *Muḥaṣṣal* representative of the Ash‘arī/Sunnī tradition, and that he must have considered Rāzī one of the leading authorities within that tradition. On the reception of Rāzī’s *Muḥaṣṣal* (as well as his other *kalām* texts) in Islamic theology, see van Ess, *Die Erkenntnislehre*, 30–33. Its influence on Tafāzānī’s theology is charted by Madelung in “Al-Taftāzānī und die sunnitschen Philosophie,” 228ff.

There is nothing clear or informative in the theological books which are in circulation. Nor do their [attempts to formulate] fundamental principles (*tambīd al-qawā'id*) have source or effect, with the exception of the "Compendium" (*al-Muḥaṣṣal*), whose title is not in agreement with what it implies, and which does not clarify what it claims to. They believe that it (*al-Muḥaṣṣal*) is adequate for knowledge, however, and that it will cure the sickness of ignorance and the uncritical acceptance of authority. But the truth is that it contains a great amount of both good and bad, and one who relies on it in acquiring certain knowledge will not be successful. On the contrary, the truth-seeking student will view it as someone thirsty who arrives at a mirage, and who becomes perplexed by the diverse paths, despairing from the victory of the correct course. I think that I should lift up the curtain from the veiled-faces of virgins, and expose defects which are in the places of its counter-arguments (*shubuhāt*), and point to what is bad and good in it, and explain the doubt (*shakk*) and certainty (*yaqīn*) that must be investigated in it, even though a group of highly esteemed scholars has attempted to clarify it and comment on it, and another group has endeavored to refute and invalidate its fundamentals. But most of them have not followed the principle of fairness, and their elucidations are not free of wrong inclination and superficiality.<sup>17</sup>

Ṭūsī makes several perceptive observations. The first is that during his time, the *Muḥaṣṣal* was a standard work of theology in the *madrasa* curriculum.<sup>18</sup> The *Muḥaṣṣal*, he writes, gained a reputation that led "a group of highly esteemed scholars to clarify it and comment on it" and led others "to refute [it] and invalidate its fundamentals."<sup>19</sup> Ṭūsī himself thought that the work contains both valuable and useless material. He accordingly considered it necessary to distinguish what was "good from the bad" in the work, as well as to expose the work's defects by addressing the doubts that Rāzī failed to resolve.

17. Rāzī, *Muḥaṣṣal*, 1–2.

18. On the content and structure of the *Muḥaṣṣal*, see Sabra, "Science and Philosophy in Medieval Islamic Theology. The Evidence of the Fourteenth Century," *passim*. On Rāzī's involvement in the *madrasa* and a discussion of his students, see Endress, "Reading Avicenna in the Madrasa: Intellectual Genealogies and Chains of Transmission of Philosophy and the Sciences in the Islamic East," 397–408.

19. For a list of commentaries on the *Muḥaṣṣal*, see Wisnovsky, "The Nature and Scope of Arabic Philosophical Commentary in Post-Classical (ca. 1100–1900 AD) Islamic Intellectual History: Some Preliminary Observations," 149–191.

Ṭūsī also recognized that Rāzī forged a new path in Islamic theology by opposing the practice of *taqlīd*. In the above selection he highlights that Rāzī sought to forge a new path in Islamic theology. He also notes that this path was marked by the opposition to *taqlīd*. He highlights that the *Muḥaṣṣal* had earned a reputation as a cure for *taqlīd* during his time. Thus, in the earlier quote, he states that according to some scholars—we can assume that he has Rāzī’s proponents in mind—the *Muḥaṣṣal* “cure[d] the sickness of ignorance and the uncritical acceptance of authority” (*taqlīd*).

Rāzī fought against *taqlīd* not only in theology, but also in philosophy and scriptural commentary. To gain a deeper understanding of how Rāzī charted a new course in these disciplines by fighting against *taqlīd*, it is essential to examine the self-reflective remarks that Rāzī makes about his methodology, since these remarks show how he intends to free scholars from their attachments to *taqlīd*. Rāzī discusses his methodological course in the introductions to *Al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya*, an early philosophical work, and *Mafātiḥ al-ghayb*, his commentary on the Qur’ān. In what follows, I examine these remarks and elucidate the new methodological courses that Rāzī establishes for philosophy and Qur’ān commentary, and highlight the new directions in which he aimed to take these disciplines.

## 1.1 RĀZĪ’S ESCAPE FROM TAQLĪD IN PHILOSOPHY

Early in his career Rāzī raised concerns about the uncritical acceptance of authority (*taqlīd*). In *al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya*, he accuses his colleagues in philosophy of acquiescing to arguments and methods that were established by ancient and Islamic authorities.<sup>20</sup> In this work (whose decisive role in the post-classical tradition has been recently examined) he presents a

20. *Al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya* falls within the tradition of Avicennian philosophy that flourished in Khurāsān. Book one focuses on basic concepts in philosophy, book two focuses on physics, and book three on metaphysics. This is one of Rāzī’s earliest works. Rāzī composed it ca. 1182, after he arrived in Bukhara (ca. 576/1180) and possibly while he traveled through Samarqand, Ghazna, and Herat. Ibn Taymiyya used it as a source for Rāzī’s views. See the following references in his *Dar’ al-ta’āruf al-aql wa-l-naql*: 3:23; 4:290; 6:350; 8:273–274; 9:190–191, 196–206, 228, and 268. Later philosophers such as Mulla Sadra (d. 1050/1640) used it extensively, however, as a philosophical source on a variety of issues. See the following references in

methodology that intends to deter scholars from falling into a state of *taqlīd*.<sup>21</sup> The accusations he directs against scholars of his intellectual milieu echo the objections that Ghazālī had already raised against the *falāsifa*. It will thus be appropriate to examine Rāzī's critique of his colleagues in philosophy in light of Ghazālī's considerations of *taqlīd*.<sup>22</sup>

Before Rāzī, Ghazālī had accused the *falāsifa* of passively acceding to the Avicennian canon and to the Aristotelian-Neoplatonic body of knowledge that served as its foundation. In his introduction to the *Incoherence of the Philosophers* Ghazālī argues that the *falāsifa* are in a state of *taqlīd* in relation to Aristotle's philosophical corpus.<sup>23</sup> In his view, the *falāsifa* naively believed that the proofs advanced by Aristotle, which were later elaborated upon by Fārābī and Avicenna, qualified as rational demonstrations. In fact, however, many of the arguments formulated by the ancient and Islamic philosophers do not fulfill the criteria of demonstration. In this respect they remained in a state of *taqlīd* in relation to their philosophical predecessors of the ancient tradition.<sup>24</sup>

Ghazālī discerns a second respect in which the *falāsifa* are guilty of *taqlīd*. This has been noted by Richard M. Frank. He explains that, in Ghazālī's view, if the *falāsifa* were sincere in their claim that their views had been rationally demonstrated, then they would wholly reject *taqlīd*. They would free themselves from the state of *taqlīd* by examining the evidence for the truth of any proposition without regard to who asserts it. But in fact, the *falāsifa* and their followers do not seriously consider objections or counter-objections to their positions. Their psychological state of *taqlīd* binds them intellectually to their predecessors; and it leads them to passively and uncritically accept inconclusive arguments, erroneous conclusions, and deceptive arguments from ancient philosophy. Furthermore, it causes them to affirm the internal

the index to the *al-Hikma al-muta'āliya fī'l-asfār al-'aqliyya al-arba'a*, 1:96 and 389; 2:31 and 261; 3:23, 3:26, 3:42, 3:145, 3:375, 3:452, 3:480, 3:511; 6:171.

21. On the reception of this work in the post-classical tradition, see Eichner, "Dissolving the Unity of Metaphysics; From Fakhr al-Din al-Razi to Mulla Sadra al-Shirazi," 152–166.

22. On Ghazālī and *taqlīd* see Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology*, 120–122. See also the following foundational article by Frank: "Al-Ghazālī on Taqlid," *passim*.

23. On the meaning of the term *taḥāfut* (which is usually translated as "incoherence"), see Treiger, *Inspired Knowledge in Islamic Thought*, 108–115.

24. See Ghazālī's religious preface and introductions to *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*.

unity of the philosophical tradition and to dismiss its internal contradictions and inconsistencies.<sup>25</sup>

When Rāzī critiques scholars in his intellectual milieu, he agrees with Ghazālī's arguments against the *falāsifa*. He also introduces a new critique of *taqlīd* that dictates his overall methodology in *falsafa*, *kalām*, and *tafsīr*. Fundamentally, he thinks that beliefs that originate in the passive acceptance of authority are inherently unstable. Such beliefs impede progress in rational understanding and therefore cannot serve as the foundations of a discipline. Rāzī also thinks that the vast majority of scholars are intellectually bound to the methods and doctrines of their teachers. This attachment places them in a psychological state of *taqlīd* that prevents them from seriously examining the arguments and principles of philosophical authorities.

Let us now consider the self-reflective remarks that Rāzī makes about his methodology in *al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya*. In this work Rāzī accuses a group of unnamed philosophers—we can presume that he has Avicenna's followers in mind—of passively acceding to the Avicennian philosophical canon and to the ancient philosophical tradition that served as its foundation.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, he charges another group of his colleagues with devaluing the philosophical canon and refusing to use it as a source of guidance. I begin with a passage from the work's introduction in which Rāzī identifies two intellectual camps and pinpoints obstacles that impede their development of philosophy. Rāzī states:

Now, those who assert that it is obligatory to conform (*muwāfaqa*) to the ancient philosophers on every issue, minor and major, and prohibit dissent (*mufāraqatahum*) about the particular and the general know that those philosophers were not in conformity on some points with their predecessors, and were opposed to their teachings and abandoned the things they said. About that they are explicit, not just hinting. And if indeed these objections were valid, then the predecessor is rejected as a witness due to his own differences with his predecessors, and their opposition to the teaching of their teachers—as if that would be

25. Frank, "Al-Ghazālī on Taqlīd," 245–247.

26. Avicenna's influence on Rāzī's *Mabāḥith* is discussed by Janssens in "Ibn Sīnā's Impact on Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's *Mabāḥith al-mašriqiyya*, with Particular Regard to the Section Entitled *al-Ilāhiyyāt al-maḥḍa*: An Essay of Critical Evaluation," 259–285.



a pleasant drinking place and a fine course. We—according to those who are blind followers—are ordered to follow their tracks and to be guided by their lights. Our method, in its penetrating deeply into straits and plunging into the depths of the sea of details, whose complexity of probing have led to the abandonment of what has been accepted and led to the rejection of some well-known [doctrines], truly is the proper fashion and the straight path. It is their very opinion—that we ought to follow the ancients—which forces them to abandon such a view and hold fast to evidences (*al-adilla*) and proofs (*al-barāhīn*).

Just as you know the inconsistency of the doctrines of this group, know also the methodological weakness (*fasād*) of a group who made every effort to raise objections against the leading scholars and the important philosophers on great and small matters, false and base, thinking that since they made themselves opponents of those great [philosophers], they joined their group and became of the same ilk. On the contrary, by this they only displayed their abundant stupidity and their obvious ignorance, and their perfection in deficiency and their triumph in ignorance and forgetfulness.<sup>27</sup>

Rāzī divides scholars of his intellectual milieu into two groups and identifies the flaws inherent in their methodologies. He avers that the first group comprises thinkers who elevate the ancient philosophers and the *falāsifa* by contending that it is obligatory to follow their views. This group goes so far as to unquestioningly accept the whole of the philosophical canon by “prohibiting dissent about particular and general issues.” In Rāzī’s view, their inconsistency lies in prohibiting dissent while also acknowledging that the philosophers within these traditions disagreed with one another. This group undermines its own position by claiming that one ought to follow the ancient philosophical tradition, yet refusing to admit that the “predecessors”—namely Avicenna and his followers—disagreed with the ancients on both particular and general issues.

The second contingent embraces the opposite extreme by failing to realize the value of the philosophical canon. In contrast to the first group, these individuals thought that by “raising objections against the leading scholars and the important philosophers” (meaning the ancient philosophers and the *falāsifa*), they would be given similar credentials and elevated in the same way.

27. Rāzī, *Al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya*, 1:88–90.

This group undermined its own credibility, however, by refusing to study the philosophical tradition and devaluing it. Although Rāzī does not identify the individuals who belong to this group, it is surely possible that he has certain pseudo-intellectuals in mind (of an anti-*falsafī* trend), whom he critiques in his autobiography, namely Ghaylān al-Balkhī (d. ca 590/1194) and Sharaf al-Dīn al-Mas'ūdī (d. ca 585/1189—590/1194).<sup>28</sup>

Thus, the methodological problem that Rāzī confronts may be stated as follows: How can one derive benefit from the philosophical canon, yet also adopt a critical stance toward it so as not to fall into a state of *taqlīd*?

In order to overcome this difficulty and escape the dangers of *taqlīd*, Rāzī establishes a new method of dealing with the ancient and Islamic philosophical canons. He finds a middle ground between those who uncritically accept the philosophical tradition and those who reject it altogether. In *al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya* he recognizes the ancient and Islamic philosophical canons as valuable resources that serve as the foundations for his system of thought. Thus, Rāzī writes that he intends to “follow [in] the tracks” of the ancient philosophers and the *falāsifa* so that he may be “guided by [their] lights.” At the same time, however, Rāzī assumes a critical stance toward the philosophical canon. He formulates objections and counter-objections to the default positions of the philosophical canon as a means of resolving the doubts and difficulties that had arisen within it. By adopting this methodology, he avoids accepting methods and ideas simply because they are associated with the illustrious names of established authorities—especially Aristotle, Fārābī, and Avicenna. He also ensures that ideas are integrated into the philosophical canon only after they are subject to a thorough process that weighs their epistemic value. (We shall see later that Rāzī adopts a similar course in his commentary on the Qur'ān, and that he seems to have transferred this aspect of his basic mode of operation from his works of *falsafa*/*kalām* into *tafsīr*.)<sup>29</sup>

28. I am thankful to Ayman Shihadeh for bringing this point to my attention. For a discussion on these figures and their role in Rāzī's intellectual milieu, see Shihadeh, “From Al-Ghazālī to al-Rāzī,” 148–162. On Balkhī, see Michot, “La pandemie avicennienne au Vie/XIIe siècle: Présentation, *editio princeps* et traduction de l'introduction du Livre de l'advenue du monde (*Kitāb ḥudūth al-'ālam*) d'Ibn Ghaylān al-Balkhī,” 287–344. Rāzī's replies to the weaknesses that Mas'ūdī found in Avicenna's *Ishārāt* are discussed by Wisnovsky in “Avicennism and Exegetical Practice in the Early Commentaries on the *Ishārāt*,” 357–368.

29. On this method in Rāzī's works of *kalām*/*falsafa*, see now Wisnovsky, “Avicennism and Exegetical Practice in the Early Commentaries on the *Ishārāt*,” 357.

We can learn more about Rāzī's original methodology and how it remedies the problem of *taqlīd* by considering and explicating its components and their functions. Rāzī elaborates on his approach to philosophy in the introduction to *al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya*. He writes:

We direct our attention to and exert ourselves to summarize what we have found in the books of [our] predecessors and what we have read in the books of [our] predecessors. We select the core (*al-lubāb*) of every subject, abridge its lengthiness and verbosity, and avoid the concision that causes confusion and [instead] choose to produce clear expression. We arrange (*al-tartīb*) it in such a way that we separate questions (*masā'il*) from each other, and we then pursue them either by affirming them or refuting them. Then we supplement them with unsolved doubts and problematic objections. Then, if we are able, we follow them up with the unequivocal solution and the perfect answer [. . .] When we realized that the two parties were not on a proper course and that both extreme ways of moderation are blameworthy, we chose the middle course (*al-manhaj al-qawīm*) of the two matters and the best of the two doctrines. This means that we struggle to establish (*taqrīr*) their doctrines that reached us, and that we summarize their teachings. If we are unable to abridge (*talkhīṣ*) it or formulate (*taḥrīr*) it precisely, or show a particular aspect (*wajh*) of its corroboration, then we will point to its problematic aspect like an incurable disease. Then we will strive to explain their general concepts and to summarize their details that are scattered in the pages of their books.

Next, we will add God-given principles by formulating them precisely, summarizing them, affirming them, and providing detailed explanations of them, principles which none of the ancients understood and none of our predecessors was able to reach, so ours is an example of a book which contains everything of its kind found elsewhere, exceeding it by universal principles, proper rules, scientific points, philosophical mysteries, reproving, pointed questions and clear, shining answers. Only one who fully understands most of the discussions of the intellectuals and grasps the content of the works of the scholars so that he is able to distinguish between the old and the new and the newly acquired and the time-honored will acknowledge to me what I have recorded.<sup>30</sup>

30. Rāzī, *Al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya*, 1:88–89.

Rāzī overcomes the difficulty of *taqlīd* by employing a dialectical procedure and by introducing a new way of organizing philosophical knowledge. He uses the Avicennian philosophical canon as a foundation; he records the parts of the Avicennian philosophical curriculum, and he organizes its issues into subdivisions so that they can be investigated in greater detail. Furthermore, he supplements the canon with newly developed knowledge that substantiates and critiques it. Thus, when Rāzī records the philosophical canon, he adds “universal principles, proper rules, scientific points, philosophical mysteries, reproving, pointed questions and clear, [and] shining answers” to it. According to Rāzī, the latter material makes his work into one that supersedes previous philosophical texts, transforming it into one that “contains everything of its kind found” in the ancient and Islamic philosophical canon in addition to the “newly acquired” philosophical material that analyzes, substantiates, and critiques these original sources.

As a means of deterring scholars from falling into a state of *taqlīd*, Rāzī introduces several devices into his methodology. These are conspicuous in the textual format that he uses in many of his works. In *al-Mabāḥiṭh al-mashriqiyya* he calls on these to raise philosophical difficulties, to open them up for investigation (*baḥṭh*), and to develop solutions to them. The most noteworthy of these tools are the *maṣʾala* (“question” or “point of investigation”) and the *wajh* (“viewpoint” or “argument”).

Rāzī uses the *maṣʾala* to record, organize, and classify philosophical knowledge. By adopting the format of the *maṣʾala* in his texts, he is able to “separate [philosophical] questions from each other” and thereby create a format that is characterized by subdivisions. Now, since the *maṣʾala* can easily be multiplied—there is no limit to how many subdivisions one may record—the resultant format is an open or expansive one. Rāzī is able to include the ancient and Islamic philosophical canon as well as new concepts and principles that deviate from these foundational texts. He thus customarily begins a *maṣʾala* (his discussions of topics) by enumerating arguments for the “default” position of established intellectual authorities, which include the Avicennian position; he then incorporates “newly acquired material” that had been recently developed and that could be used to critique such established authorities.<sup>31</sup>

31. I have adopted the term “default” from Langermann.

Rāzī also introduces the *wajh*—“viewpoint” or “argument”—into his system of methods. The *wajh* could be easily multiplied (just like the *masʿala*), and it thus served as an especially convenient tool to record all possible knowledge on a given topic. That this was a salient characteristic of Rāzī’s system of methods was recognized by the bio-bibliographer al-Ṣafadī (d. 964/1367), who calls attention to it in his entry on Rāzī:

Rāzī was the first to use this systematic arrangement in his books; in his books he [employed a methodology] that was unprecedented, because he mentions a question introducing the classification of its divisions and the divisions of the branches of those divisions. He draws conclusions through indications of investigation and successive elimination, so that none of its relevant branches escapes him.<sup>32</sup>

In *al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya* Rāzī uses the *wajh* to corroborate arguments from the Aristotelian-Avicennian philosophical canon and also to critique them. He customarily does this by listing arguments that “affirm” and “counter” the positions of established authorities. Furthermore, Rāzī uses this device to address “unresolved doubts” and “problematic objections” within the philosophical tradition. By introducing the *wajh* into the format of his philosophical texts, Rāzī was able to investigate the complete range of objections and counter-objections to the arguments of the Aristotelian-Avicennian philosophical tradition. Thus, the *wajh* (like the *masʿala*) made it possible for Rāzī to develop philosophy into a dynamic and self-critical discipline that did not simply accept arguments on the basis of authority.<sup>33</sup>

Rāzī uses the *wajh* to carry out additional aims in his philosophical works. His work refines the philosophical canon by resolving its points of difficulty—what he refers to in the earlier quote as “unsolved doubts.” In order to do this, he deemed it necessary to consider a range of possible objections to the positions of canonical historical authorities. The *wajh* served as a convenient means of recording “unsolved doubts” and “problematic objections.” In order to refine the tradition and substantiate its

32. Ṣafadī, *Kitāb al-wāfi bi-l-wafāyāt*, 4:429. The importance of this passage is noted by McAuliffe in “Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī on God as Khāliq,” 279.

33. As mentioned above, already Avicenna had started this process through his method of “aporetic and investigative.” See the references to the articles by Gutas mentioned above.

positions, Rāzī needed to explore all possible objections to the canon, especially to questions that had weighty arguments on both sides. He does this by recording counterarguments (*shubuhāt*) to the positions that were generated by philosophical authorities.<sup>34</sup>

Rāzī was not the only figure to adopt the above dialectical method in the twelfth century or to introduce devices to critique established authorities. In his article on the scholastic method, Makdisi (following the foundational work of Grabmann) argues that many of the elements that constitute the dialectical method were used in Islamic jurisprudence by Ibn ‘Aqīl (d. 513/1119) and presumably others as well in the twelfth century, and that this century was a pivotal point in the history of scholasticism in the Latin West and the Islamic East.<sup>35</sup> And as Griffel points out more recently, the dialectical turn seems to have been a salient feature of the twelfth century, and other figures including Abū-l Barakāt al-Baghdādī (d. 560/1165) also placed the critique of established authority at the forefront of their methodology.<sup>36</sup> For Rāzī, however, such devices were a way of escaping *taqlīd* not only in philosophy but also in other disciplines, including Qur’ān commentary.

## 1.2 RĀZĪ’S ESCAPE FROM *TAQLĪD* IN QUR’ĀN COMMENTARY

We have seen that Rāzī developed ways to ensure that the tradition of Islamic philosophy rejected the uncritical acceptance of established authorities and remained a self-critical discipline. We have also seen that he introduced devices into his textual format as a way of severing the attachments that tied scholars to earlier authorities within the ancient and Islamic philosophical traditions.

In the genre of Qur’ān commentary, Rāzī also claims to forge a new methodological course by discarding the approaches of exegesis that were developed by the established authorities who preceded him. In the introduction to *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, he establishes a new course that aims to make obsolete

34. On *shubuhāt*, see Rosenthal, *Knowledge Triumphant*, 299.

35. Makdisi, “The Scholastic Method in Medieval Education,” 640–645.

36. Griffel, “Between al-Ghazālī and Abū l-Barakāt al-Baghdādī: The Dialectical Turn in the Philosophy of Iraq and Iran During the Sixth/Twelfth Century,” 74.

the methods that characterized the classical *tafsīr* tradition. Although Rāzī does not identify commentators by name here, it is reasonable to presume that he thinks that none of his predecessors formulated a satisfactory method of exegesis—that is, one that would free the discipline from the bonds of *taqlīd*. In the following section I examine Rāzī’s self-reflective remarks about *tafsīr*, in which he discusses the current state of the discipline, critiques the old methods of his predecessors, and presents the salient aspects of his innovative methodology.

In his programmatic remarks to *Maḥāṭib al-ghayb*, Rāzī develops a theme that Māturīdī (d. 944) had already advanced in the tenth century. In his *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd*, Māturīdī pinpoints *taqlīd*—the uncritical assent to beliefs established by intellectual authorities—as the source of heresy and error. He claims that scholars failed to distinguish truth from falsehood because they acquiesced to the beliefs of established authorities. As a consequence of this naïve practice, moreover, false teachings and heretical beliefs developed and multiplied within the Islamic community. In his view, it is only by breaking free from the bonds of *taqlīd* and severing attachments to established authorities that one will be able to distinguish true from false belief and extinguish heresy from the Islamic community.<sup>37</sup>

Rāzī, too, argues that false teachings and heretical views have developed within the Islamic community, and he offers this as a pretext for composing *Maḥāṭib al-ghayb*. He appeals to the well-known theme of the “saved sect” to show that heretical beliefs have multiplied, and to demonstrate that each heretical path is marked by a plurality of errors. In the introduction to *Maḥāṭib al-ghayb*, Rāzī elaborates on this theme, which can be traced to the following prophetic tradition: “My community will be divided into seventy-three sects, all of them destined for hell-fire except for one.” He writes:

This [tradition] indicates that seventy-two [sects] are qualified by false beliefs and that these are schools of thought that have deviated from the truth. Now, each of these sects is distinguished by more than one error; indeed, many of their beliefs are erroneous. Among these beliefs are those that relate to God’s essence, His attributes, His ordinances, His acts and His names; and questions

37. Rudolph, *Al-Māturīdī und die sunnitische Theologie in Samarkand*, 255. On Māturīdī’s method of Qur’ānic exegesis, see Goetz, “Māturīdī und sein Kitāb Ta’wīlāt al-Qur’ān,” 27–70.

that concern God's compulsion of human acts, His power, justice, and the resurrection of bodies, and the promise and the threat, names, ordinances and leadership. If we allot the number of erring parties—the seventy-two sects—to these many questions, then the number realized will be a great one. All the errors that we have mentioned are realized in the community's sects. In addition, it is well known that the parties in error that fall outside of the community amount to approximately seven hundred. If one combines their errors with those found in other factions of the Islamic community, and if one takes into account all the intellectual questions that pertain to theology and the ordinances concerning [God's] essences and attributes, then the total reaches a great number.<sup>38</sup>

In the above programmatic remarks to his Qur'ān commentary, Rāzī employs the theme of the saved sect to justify his new methodological course in *tafsīr*. He interprets the prophetic tradition of the saved sect to mean that seventy-two sects within the Islamic community have assumed false teachings, which he classifies as heretical; and he proposes that only one Islamic sect successfully distinguishes truth from falsehood. Because each of these sects errs on many questions—theological, philosophical, legal, and political—it is plain to see, Rāzī argues, that the number of errors in the community is great. Furthermore, if one adds the errors of the seven hundred sects that fall outside the Islamic community to this number, it becomes even greater—or even infinite.

What is significant here is that Rāzī thus composed *Maḥāṭib al-ghayb* on the pretext of correcting the great number of errors in the Islamic community and expunging heretical views from it. His *actual* aims, however, can be discerned from the methodology that he applies in this work. These aims are multifarious. Rāzī's objective is to organize all knowledge that was available during his time within the framework of his commentary. To that end, he organizes knowledge from the ancient sciences (logic, physics, metaphysics, astronomy, and medicine) and from the religious sciences (law, *ḥadīth*, theology, and mysticism) according to the order and arrangement of Qur'ānic verses. A further objective is to expatiate on the Qur'ān by exploiting the full range of these bodies of knowledge. Yet another objective is to expose all of the errors that had arisen within these branches of knowledge, to investigate

38. Rāzī, *Maḥāṭib al-ghayb*, 1:4.



the problematic difficulties of these branches of knowledge and to resolve them.

Rāzī devises a systematic procedure of Qurʾān commentary in order to achieve these aims, which are unprecedented in the *tafsīr* tradition. To my knowledge, no Qurʾān commentator before him had considered the Qurʾān, which had undisputed authority in Islamic civilization, to carry out these multifarious aims. By introducing a distinctive procedure into the genre of *tafsīr*, Rāzī intends to deter Qurʾān commentators from relying on old methods of exegesis; and he intends to sever their attachments to the established authorities within classical *tafsīr*. By implementing his new methodology, Rāzī aims to show his contemporaries how to realize the extensive scope of questions that can be derived from the Qurʾān and how to realize the profundity of meanings embedded in the Qurʾān. Furthermore, he aims to guide his contemporaries to the profundity of meanings that God deposited in scripture by exploiting the rich resources of the ancient and Islamic sciences. Such an innovative methodology sees the Qurʾān—which was naturally vested with undisputable authority by the Muslim community—as a vehicle for the systematization of ancient and Islamic knowledge; conversely, it sees the complete range of ancient and Islamic sciences as indispensable to the task of Qurʾānic interpretation.

Let us now consider Rāzī's introduction to *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, in which he claims to radically alter the way that the science of Qurʾān commentary is practiced. Rāzī writes:

Know that I have occasionally remarked that it is possible to derive one thousand points of investigation from the benefits and gems of this noble chapter (*al-fātiḥa*). Some people who were envious and others who were ignorant deemed this farfetched. They took this to mean that I would just make remarks that were familiar to them and [offer] words whose kernels and foundations were empty of verification (*taḥqīq*). When I set out to compose this book I set forth this introduction as a directive (*tanbīh*) that [indicates that the goal] which we just mentioned is within reach.<sup>39</sup>

39. Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 1:3. For translations from Muslim exegesis on the first chapter of the Qurʾān, see Rippin, "Three Commentaries on Surat al-Fatiha, The Opening," 29–34. I follow A.J. Arberry's translation of the Qurʾān (from *The Koran Interpreted*) throughout this book, occasionally modifying his translations.

In the above programmatic remarks to *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, Rāzī claims that his innovative procedural method distinguishes his work from all Qurʾān commentaries that have preceded it. He implies that his predecessors in the *tafsīr* tradition did little more than passively transmit old ideas and interpretations. He furthermore suggests that such commentators failed to exploit the full range of the ancient and Islamic sciences by relying on limited sources of knowledge when they elaborated on the Qurʾān. Rāzī maintains that if exegetes had had the benefit of his procedural method, they would not have simply interpreted the Qurʾān in accordance with “ideas that were familiar to them” or filled their commentaries with “words whose kernels and foundations were empty of verification.”

To set the tradition of Qurʾān commentary on a new methodological course, and to break free of the methods that characterized the classical *tafsīr* tradition, Rāzī guides his reader toward his new methodology. By extracting one thousand questions for research and investigation from the first chapter of the Qurʾān alone, by organizing all available knowledge from the ancient and Islamic sciences within the framework of his exegesis of the seven verses that make up the *fātiḥa*, and by bringing to bear the ancient and Islamic sciences on the *fātiḥa*, Rāzī teaches his reader to derive a plurality of questions and to realize the profundity of meanings of each Qurʾānic verse. I turn now to one instance from *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* that exemplifies Rāzī’s systematic method of procedure. This example reveals that Rāzī conceived the introduction to his Qurʾān commentary as a manual that teaches how to elicit “questions that reach into the thousands” from individual Qurʾānic verses.

When Rāzī comments on the first chapter of the Qurʾān (*al-fātiḥa*), he provides a model of this procedure and a practical example of how to carry out his proposed methodology. Although his claim to derive “thousands of questions” from the first chapter of the Qurʾān is hyperbolic, it is true that he elicits hundreds of questions for research and investigation from one line of this verse that titles God, “the Master of the Day of Doom.” In Rāzī’s view, this Qurʾānic verse alludes to ideas surrounding the fate of the soul at the end times, including the possibility that the soul can return to the body to which it is attached at the final resurrection (*maʿād*). He proposes that there are two kinds of questions (*masāʾil*) that can be derived from this single line—rational (*ʿaqliyya*) and scriptural (*samʿiyya*); and he implies that the fundamental

epistemological distinction between rational and scriptural sources of knowledge will dictate his procedure throughout his Qurʾān commentary.<sup>40</sup>

To teach his reader to elicit multiple questions from individual Qurʾānic verses, Rāzī begins by deriving two rational propositions from the Qurʾānic phrase “the Master of the Day of Doom.” The first assertion is “that the world can be annihilated and then returned [to existence]”; and the second is “that the return of a person after death is possible.” By calling these assertions “rational,” Rāzī implies that they fall within the domain of the intellect—that is, that the difficulties surrounding them can be resolved using human reasoning. Accordingly, he investigates (*baḥṭh*) these propositions, raises questions surrounding them, and then verifies (*taḥqīq*) them by employing the faculty of intellect (*ʿaql*).<sup>41</sup>

Subsequently, Rāzī elicits further divisions (*aqsām*) of knowledge for investigation from these propositions that fall within the purview of the faculty of intellect. Such a process of the production of knowledge has the potential to generate five hundred divisions of knowledge that can be investigated and corroborated by the intellective faculty. Some of these divisions include the following: the true nature of the soul’s substance; the particulars of the soul’s states; the circumstances in which the soul subsists after the death of the body; the states of the soul’s happiness or misery; the evidence that God’s power can cause the soul to return. Because these divisions of knowledge belong to the domain of the intellect, Rāzī affirms that the issues surrounding them can be corroborated by the faculty of reason alone. In his view, it is only by generating five hundred “rational” and “subtle” investigations (*abḥāth*) that one can exhaustively treat such divisions of knowledge, comprehend their concepts and principles, and reach the subtle meanings that are embedded in the Qurʾān.<sup>42</sup>

To teach his reader to derive multiple questions from individual Qurʾānic verses, Rāzī also generates assertions (or ideas) that belong to the domain of

40. Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 1:8.

41. Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 1:8. On the various functions of *taḥqīq* in philosophical commentaries, see Wisnovsky, “Avicennism and Exegetical Practice in the Early Commentaries on the *Ishārāt*,” 354–357; van Ess, *Die Erkenntnislehre*, 132. For the Avicennian understanding of this term, see Gutas, *Avicenna*, 188–191. See also the shades of meaning given by Lane in *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, 1:605–606.

42. Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 1:8.

scripture (*sam'*)—the Qur'ān and prophetic traditions. He maintains that in order to exhaustively treat the meaning of the Qur'ānic verse “the Master of the Day of Doom,” and to reach the profundity of meanings embedded in this Qur'ānic phrase, it is essential to examine all the scriptural assertions and ideas that can be elicited from it. These include “the circumstances or conditions that arise at the Resurrection,” “[God’s] breathing into the forms [of bodies],” “the death of created beings,” “the annihilation of the heavens and the stars,” “the occurrence of the resurrection,” and “the death of spiritual and bodily beings.” Rāzī implies that all of these ideas (as well as many others) can be derived from the single Qur'ānic verse “the Master of the Day of Doom.” In his exegesis, Rāzī intends to investigate these divisions of knowledge, to raise difficulties concerning them, and to verify their contents by drawing on the Qur'ān and prophetic traditions.

The procedure that I have described here effectively generates knowledge from the ancient and Islamic sciences and uses such knowledge to expatiate on the Qur'ān. This systematic procedure dictates the way that Rāzī operates throughout *Mafātih al-ghayb*. In this work, he consistently uses this method to organize the complete range of ancient and Islamic sciences into the framework of his commentary. By classifying all the knowledge that was available in his culture according to the order and arrangement of Qur'ānic verses, Rāzī achieved one of his primary goals: to create a Qur'ān commentary whose content measured up to the profundity and plurality of meanings that God had deposited in the Qur'ān.<sup>43</sup>

My analysis of the earlier archetypal example from *Mafātih al-ghayb* helps us to understand the vital bond between the postulates of Rāzī's theological worldview and his *procedure* of Qur'ānic commentary. Rāzī's procedure of eliciting questions from Qur'ānic verses and of utilizing such questions to derive problems for further investigation is motivated by a central theological conviction—that God created the Qur'ān as a treasure trove of wisdom. Such wisdom encompassed the *ancient* or *rational* sciences—logic, physics (natural science), metaphysics, astronomy, and medicine—that had been assimilated into Islamic society and subsequently augmented and refined by it.<sup>44</sup> It also encompassed the

43. This theme appears earlier in *tafsir* literature. See the informative footnote by Saleh in *The Formation of the Classical Tafsir Tradition*, 1.

44. For a study of the process through which the Greek heritage of philosophy and science was transmitted to Islamic society, see Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture*, *passim*.

branches of *religious* sciences—law, *ḥadīth*, mysticism, and theology (including its theories of physics, anthropology, and cosmology) that Islamic society had originated and developed. By postulating that the Qurʾān contains knowledge from the aforementioned bodies of knowledge, Rāzī was impelled to devise a procedural system with the exegetical tools, devices, methods, and techniques that would enable him to discover the contents of the rational (*ʿaqlī*) and religious (*naqlī*) sciences in the Qurʾān.<sup>45</sup>

That Rāzī combined the theological postulate and procedural system described previously leads me to believe that the place of the Qurʾān in his thought is paradoxical. On one hand, Rāzī affirms that the Qurʾān is a treasure house that *stores* a mass of philosophical, scientific, and religious knowledge. Indeed, it is his view that the content of the manifold bodies of knowledge are already embedded in the Qurʾān, and that consequently, his task as a commentator is to *recover* that knowledge. On the other hand, Rāzī affirms that every Qurʾānic verse serves as an opportunity for him to *produce* knowledge, and thus, his task as a commentator is to *systematize* the contents of the sciences according to the parameters of Qurʾānic verses.



Now that we have examined some of the ways that Rāzī overhauled the methodology of *tafsīr*, it is appropriate to investigate the organizational principles and textual devices that make up his system of methods in *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*. The key organizational principle that Rāzī avails himself of in *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* is the *maʾāla* (“question” or “issue”); and the key textual

On the classification of the sciences, see Biesterfeldt, *Die Zweige des Wissens. Theorie und Klassifikation der mittelalterlich-islamischen Wissenschaften in der Darstellung des Ibn Farīghūn*, passim.

45. Rāzī draws a distinction between the religious and non-religious sciences in his commentary on Qurʾān 2, 19: “O you men, serve your Lord Who created you, and those that were before you; haply so you will be godfearing”; Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 2:101–102. When Rāzī comments on this verse, he argues that religious knowledge is more noble than non-religious knowledge. He also argues that theology (*ʿilm al-uṣūl*) is the highest of sciences because its goal is to know God’s essence, His attributes and acts, and the various divisions of knowledge. The various attitudes of Islamic orthodoxy to the ancient sciences (*ʿulūm al-awāʾil*) is discussed by Goldziher in “Stellung der alten islamischen Orthodoxie zu den antiken Wissenschaften,” 3–46. See also the critique by Gutas in *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture*, 166–175.

device that he implements in this work is the *wajh* (“argument,” “aspect,” or “viewpoint”).<sup>46</sup> Now, Rāzī had already employed these principles and devices in his works of philosophy (*falsafa*) and theology (*kalām*) to ensure that those disciplines continued to develop self-critically. In *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* Rāzī calls on these cross-disciplinary features of his system of methods to achieve some of his objectives in Qur’ān commentary. In his programmatic remarks to *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* Rāzī discusses these principles and devices and explains how they will assist him in the practice of *tafsīr*. He writes:

Know that whenever we mention an issue (*mas’ala*) in this book and corroborate it with ten viewpoints (*wujūh*), then each of those viewpoints is an issue that we intend to investigate. For example, if we record five counter-arguments (*shubuhāt*) concerning an issue, then each of those counter-arguments is an issue in itself [that we will also investigate]. Now, if we respond to each counter-argument with two or three replies, then those replies may be considered three questions or issues [for further investigation]. For instance, if we say that the terms that have been mentioned in the Arabic language have been brought with sixty aspects, and we separate those aspects from one another, then such a discussion will in fact have sixty questions. This is because what we mean by the *mas’ala* is simply a place to investigate a topic (*mawḍi‘ al-su’āl*) and to corroborate it (*taqrīr*). Since each one of these aspects is just that, then each one of them is a question apart from others.<sup>47</sup>

In the above remarks Rāzī elaborates on the systematic procedure that he intends to use in his Qur’ān commentary. The central component of the proposed procedure is the *mas’ala* (“question” or “issue”), which he defines as “a place to raise a subject for investigation.” When Rāzī comments on the Qur’ān, he generates multiple questions (*masā’il*) from each Qur’ānic verse; and he furthermore employs such questions to organize knowledge within his commentary. Within the exhaustive list of questions that he derives from each Qur’ānic verse, Rāzī classifies knowledge from the ‘aqlī and naqlī sciences—all of which in his view relate in one way or another to the verse that he is commenting on. It was thus by availing himself of the *mas’ala* and by using it as an overarching organizational principle that Rāzī was able to

46. For a discussion of the term *wajh/wujūh* in *tafsīr* literature (in which it refers primarily to a genre), see Rippin, “Lexicographical Texts and the Qur’ān,” 167–171.

47. Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 1:12–13.

achieve his objectives, which are to systematize the great mass of learning from all branches of the sciences into his Qur'ān commentary and to redesign the genre of *tafsīr* into one that classified all available knowledge—both ancient and Islamic—according to the order and arrangement of Qur'ānic verses.<sup>48</sup>

In addition to transferring the organizational principle of the *ma'sala* across disciplinary boundaries—from *falsafa/kalām* into *tafsīr*—and implementing it in his Qur'ān commentary, Rāzī also avails himself of a textual device, namely the *wajh* (“argument” or “viewpoint”), which he had already implemented in his works of philosophy and theology. By generating multiple *wujūh* (as he generated multiple *masa'il*), Rāzī succeeds in recording, analyzing, corroborating, and critiquing the knowledge from the 'aqlī and naqlī sciences that he integrates into his work. When he comments on Qur'ānic verses, he catalogues viewpoints and arguments that belong to the Muslim theologians (*mutakallimūn*) and philosophers (*falāsifa*) using the rubric of the *wajh*. Moreover, he calls on this device to classify arguments, categorizing them as either rational ('aqlī) or scriptural (naqlī), listing objections to them, and responding to them with counterarguments. Finally, he introduces this device into his textual format in order to transmit variant readings (*qirā'āt*) of the Qur'ān and to enumerate the established interpretations of the classical *tafsīr* tradition. Rāzī's various uses of the *wajh* and the changes in textual format that resulted from them provide evidence that this simple textual device was indispensable to his system of methods, which proposed a novel and rigorous way of transmitting and producing knowledge and succeeded in recasting the overall methodology of Qur'ān commentary.

My analysis confirms that Rāzī designed his system of methods with fastidious care, and that he paid special attention to the way that he transmitted and produced knowledge within the 'aqlī and naqlī sciences. Furthermore, it substantiates my hypothesis that Rāzī designed the template of his Qur'ān commentary by importing organizational principles and textual devices (the *ma'sala* and the *wajh*) from *falsafa/kalām* into *tafsīr*. Finally, my analysis

48. A major issue that requires further investigation is the extent to which Rāzī thinks that the Qur'ān includes knowledge of the ancient or non-religious sciences. Rāzī discusses this question when he comments on the Qur'ānic phrase, “We have neglected nothing in the Book” (Qur'ān 6, 38).



suggests that Rāzī (more so than his predecessors) recognized that such principles and devices would be profitable in the *tafsīr* tradition. By capitalizing on the *maṣʾala* and the *wajb*, Rāzī succeeded in assimilating the full range of the *ʿaqlī* and *naqlī* sciences (including their most recent developments in philosophy and theology, as we shall see in chapters four and five) into the genre of Sunnī *tafsīr*.

Rāzī also succeeded in transforming Sunnī *tafsīr* into a discipline that tested the epistemic value of all the knowledge that it accumulated from the ancient and Islamic sciences. If we are to take him at his word, he was ultimately motivated by the urge to safeguard the *tafsīr* tradition against *taqlīd*. Moreover, the system of methods that he devised effectively deters commentators from uncritically assenting to interpretations and arguments, since it demands that the value of all knowledge be tested and verified through the process of its transmission. Thus, the efforts that Rāzī undertook to outmode the conventional methods of the *tafsīr* tradition and to forge a new methodology for the genre suggest that he had assumed an especially critical stance toward the methods of the classical *tafsīr* tradition, just as he assumed a critical stance toward the methods employed in *falsafa* and *kalām*. While the organizational methods and textual devices that I have described and analyzed may have been used before Rāzī, it was he who employed them to make *falsafa*, *kalām*, and *tafsīr* more self-critical, and it is he who introduced them into the genre of Sunnī *tafsīr* in order to make the practice of critiquing authority a standard convention in it.<sup>49</sup>

### 1.3. THE QUR'ĀN'S METHOD

Thus far we have examined Rāzī's self-reflective remarks about his methodology in *tafsīr* and shown how they reflect his overall agenda, which was to sever the attachments that bind scholars to established authorities and to their intellectual affiliations. It will now be fitting to approach Rāzī's methodology from an alternative angle, namely by analyzing the methods and

49. In this chapter I have analyzed Rāzī's methodology by examining the principles and devices that he imports from *falsafa*/*kalām* into *tafsīr*. In other words, I have chosen to look across his works to determine his aims rather than adopting a historical approach. Naturally, comparing Rāzī's aims in *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* with those of earlier commentators in the *tafsīr* tradition would have been an equally fruitful approach.



procedures that he proposes are already embedded in the Qurʾān. By taking this approach we will be able to discern a salient innovative feature of Rāzī's methodology; fundamentally, we will be able to discern the crucial difference between the Qurʾān's method of expressing ideas and the rational or discursive methods employed by the *falāsifa* and *mutakallimūn*.

Recent scholarship has pointed out that when Rāzī recited his last will on his deathbed, he expressed several ideas that cast light on the relationship between the aims of his rational works and his personal piety. Scholars have interpreted these self-reflective remarks to mean that Rāzī professed the superiority of the Qurʾān's method over the rationalistic and discursive methods of *falsafa* and *kalām*. I begin by discussing these remarks and then elaborating on the theological methods and patterns of reasoning that Rāzī believes are embedded in the Qurʾān. On his deathbed, Rāzī stated the following:

I tried the methods of *kalām* and *falsafa*, and I did not find in them the profit which I found in the great Qurʾān, for the Qurʾān ascribes all greatness and glory to God, and prevents preoccupation with **objections and contradictions**. These serve only to teach us that the human intellect comes to nothing and fades away in these treacherous defiles and hidden ways.<sup>50</sup>

In his work on Rāzī's ethics, Shihadeh interprets this passage to mean that, in Rāzī's view, revelation is endowed with "spiritually transformative features" that are ideal for perfecting human souls. Shihadeh points out that for Rāzī, all revealed religions attribute perfections to God and exhort people to proclaim God's greatness. Moreover, the Qurʾān (as well as other revelations) avoids intricate theological problems by preventing people from becoming preoccupied with the minutiae of "objections and contradictions," which one finds in works of *falsafa* and *kalām*. On the basis of further evidence from Rāzī's *Dhamm al-ladhdhāt*, Shihadeh concludes that, in Rāzī's view, the "method of the Qurʾān" is superior to the discursive methods employed in *falsafa* and *kalām*.<sup>51</sup>

50. Street, "The Life and Works," 136.

51. Shihadeh, *The Teleological Ethics*, 201–202.

Shihadeh also calls attention to an additional remark in which Rāzī proclaims the superiority of the Qurʾān's method. In a treatise on exegesis, *Asrār al-tanzīl wa-anwār al-taʾwīl*, Rāzī states:

How beautiful these pointers, contained in the great Qurʾān, are!!! No method occurs to the **mind or imagination** of this humble person, who is the author of the present book, which is better, more advantageous or more attractive for human souls and intellects towards the presence of Him who is Holy, One and Everlasting, than these divine expositions and lofty secrets!<sup>52</sup>

I think that we can gain deeper insight into the ways that the Qurʾān engages the intellect and imagination in Rāzī's system of thought by examining two paramount examples from *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*. By dissecting these examples, we will be able to grasp his understanding of the Qurʾān's method. It is Rāzī's view that core theological ideas are embedded in the Qurʾān's language. Indeed, as recently argued by Lagarde, Rāzī holds that God has deposited ideas from the branches of the sciences—metaphysics, cosmology, natural science, anthropology, and psychology—in the Qurʾān for human beings to discover.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, Rāzī holds that the Qurʾān presents its ideas using a perfectly *logical* procedure and in a *didactic* manner, whereby each verse corroborates the one before it.<sup>54</sup>

When Rāzī comments on Qurʾān 6, 59 he explains how the Qurʾān engages the intellect and imagination when it presents its teachings; furthermore, he explains how the Qurʾān presents its teachings methodically and didactically. Qurʾān 6, 59 reads as follows:

With Him are the keys to the Unseen; none knows them but He. He knows what is in land and sea; not a leaf falls, but He knows it. Not a grain in the earth's shadows, not a thing, fresh or withered, but it is in a Book Manifest.<sup>55</sup>

52. Shihadeh, *The Teleological Ethics* (citing Rāzī's *Asrār al-tanzīl*), 202.

53. This is one of the premises of Lagarde's extensive study of Rāzī's Qurʾān commentary.

54. Lagarde, *Les secrets de l'invisible*, 199–208.

55. Trans. Arberry.

In the following passages, which I have extracted from Rāzī's lengthy commentary on Qur'ān 6, 59, Rāzī illustrates by example the preeminence of the Qur'ān's methodical and didactic presentation of ideas:

Know that this Qur'ānic verse contains an additional subtle point (*daqīqa*), which is that it is difficult to attain knowledge completely and perfectly through intellectual propositions (*al-qaḍāyā al-'aqlīyya*) alone. This does not apply to those perfect intellectuals who are accustomed to turning away from judgments that are grounded in sensation and imagination or to those who are familiar with the method of calling to mind the abstract intelligibles. The likes of such a man is rare. God's words, "With Him are the Keys to the Unseen; none knows them but He" (6, 59), refer to an abstract, pure, intellectual assertion, so the man whose intellect is able to understand its meaning is rare indeed. It was so that everyone could benefit that God revealed the Qur'ān.<sup>56</sup>

There is an alternative method of interpreting this verse, which we shall mention here: When one wishes to communicate an abstract, pure, and intellectual proposition to all people, then he reveals it as a parable in order to make it understood to everyone. The gist of this verse conforms to this principle (*qānūn*). This is because God begins by stating, "With Him are the Keys of the Unseen; none knows them but He." He then confirms (*akkada*) this abstract, universal notion with two particular sensorial images by stating, "He knows what is in land and sea." This is because one division that falls within God's knowledge includes the totality of creatures that are in the land and the sea; and since sense perception and imagination comprehend the realities of the land and the sea, God mentioned perceptible things in order to disclose the true nature of this illustrious idea.<sup>57</sup>

Rāzī evidently thought that the Qur'ānic phrase "With Him are the keys to the Unseen" had significant value and meaning, since he derived the title of his Qur'ān commentary from it. Furthermore, as recently noted by Lagarde, he counted it among the verses that reveal the Qur'ān's "subtleties" (*daqā'iq*), which include the divine logic of scriptural language.<sup>58</sup> Now, in the above

56. Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 13:9.

57. Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 13:9–10.

58. Lagarde, *Les secrets de l'invisible*, 235–237.

excerpts Rāzī explains why he considers the Qurʾān's method of communication superior to the methods of *kalām* and *falsafa*. It is apparent from the above remarks that Rāzī holds that certain Qurʾānic verses (including 6, 59) serve as models of rational argument because they effectively communicate ideas to a person's intellect and imagination; it is also apparent that this ideal mode of communication or well-ordered method gives the Qurʾānic method its preeminence and (what Shihadeh calls) a "spiritually transformative feature" that perfects souls.<sup>59</sup>

When Rāzī elaborates on Qurʾān 6, 59, he aims to show that the Qurʾān instructs its audience (and corroborates its teachings) by employing sensorial representations. He explains the rationale for the Qurʾān's pedagogic mode of procedure by stating that "the [parable's] images draw attention to [...] the meanings that God's words allude to," since "intellects are confused by [those images] and minds are incapable of attaining their principles."<sup>60</sup> Here, Rāzī implies that because some human intellects are weak, and because the Qurʾān was sent to benefit all people, the Qurʾān communicates theological ideas using images.

Furthermore, Rāzī aims to show precisely how the Qurʾān engages the intellect and imagination when he comments on Qurʾān 6, 59. He begins by identifying the core theological idea that is embedded in the Qurʾānic phrase "With Him are the keys to the Unseen; none knows them but He." In Rāzī's view, this verse alludes to the theological idea that God's knowledge is all-encompassing. Following his predecessors in the tradition of Qurʾān commentary (including Māturidī and Zamakhsharī), Rāzī interprets the Qurʾānic term "keys" metaphorically, maintaining that "keys" refers to the tools that open locks and bolts, which in turn enable one to grasp valuable treasures that are difficult to attain.<sup>61</sup> He proposes that God, as the one who holds keys to the Unseen world, has knowledge of what is difficult to attain—knowledge of the Unseen world. Thus, the theological idea that befits this verse, which implies that only God has keys to the Unseen world, is that God's knowledge encompasses the totality of objects that can be known.<sup>62</sup>

59. Shihadeh, *The Teleological Ethics*, 201–202.

60. Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 13:10.

61. Māturidī, *Taʾwīlāt ahl al-sunna*, 2:124; Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kashshāf*, 2:24.

62. Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 13:9; Lagarde, *Les secrets de l'invisible*, 235–237.

When Rāzī expatiates on Qurʾān 6, 59, he intends to show how the Qurʾān presents its ideas logically and how it employs a didactic procedure. In his commentary on this verse, Rāzī explains the way that the Qurʾān engages the imagination through its use of sensorial representations. Furthermore, he explains how the imagination, which apprehends the verse's sensorial representations, induces the intellect to grasp the idea that God's knowledge is all-encompassing, which he believes is the core theological idea that is embedded in the Qurʾānic phrase "With Him are the keys to the Unseen; none knows them but He." In the following selection, Rāzī addresses those aspects of the Qurʾān that give it its methodological preeminence:

When a person's imaginative faculty visualizes the form of the sea and earth in this way then he knows that they are all one insignificant division [of God's knowledge] that are included in God's words, "With Him are the keys to the Unseen; none knows them but He." Thus, the sensorial images of that parable strengthen and complete the magnificence that is realized under God's words, "With Him are the keys to the Unseen; none knows them but He." Just as God unveiled the magnificence of His words, "With Him are the keys to the Unseen," by mentioning the land and sea, He also unveiled the magnificence of the land and sea by stating, "Not a grain in the earth's shadows, not a thing, fresh or withered, but it is in a Book Manifest."<sup>63</sup>

In the above remarks Rāzī explains how the Qurʾān's symbols progressively substantiate a theological assertion, which is that God's knowledge is all-encompassing. He maintains that the Qurʾān uses a three-step didactic process and a logical method to prompt a person to understand God's omniscience. The Qurʾān first mentions that "He [God] knows what is in land and sea" and thereby engages a person's faculty of imagination. When a person's faculty of imagination apprehends the images of the land and the sea, this enables the intellect to comprehend one division of God's knowledge—terrestrial animals and creatures of the sea.

When Rāzī elaborates on the way that the Qurʾān communicates rational ideas, he proposes that, in an initial didactic step, the Qurʾān mentions "the characteristics of the land and sea" (and places "land" before "sea") because

63. Rāzī, *Maḥāṭib al-ghayb*, 13:10.

the land's entities, which include "the abundance of cities, villages, deserts, mountains and hills, in addition to the abundance of animals, plant life, and minerals," are more perceptible and familiar to humans than are the qualities of the sea. It subsequently mentions the organisms that are contained in the sea's depths, which are even more wondrous. When a person's imaginative faculty is exposed to these sensorial representations, it induces the intellect to grasp that knowledge of entities—cities, villages, deserts, animals, plant life, minerals, and so on—are only a fraction of God's all-encompassing knowledge. It thus induces the intellect to apprehend the core intellectual proposition that is embedded in the Qur'ānic expression, "With Him are the keys to the Unseen, which is that God's knowledge encompasses the totality of objects that can be known."<sup>64</sup>

In a second didactic step, the Qur'ān engages the imaginative faculty by conveying that, "not a leaf falls, but God knows it." The symbols expressed in this Qur'ānic phrase substantiate the images mentioned in the line before it with an even more accessible example: By communicating these sensorial images, the Qur'ān alludes to the idea that nothing in the world of perception changes without God's knowledge. When the imagination processes this as evidence of God's omniscience, it leads a person to understand that God's knowledge encompasses all events and particulars, since it grasps that all the entities that are present in land and contained by the sea are subsumed within God's universal knowledge.<sup>65</sup>

In a third didactic step, the Qur'ān conveys an additional teaching about God's omniscience by communicating that, "Not a grain in the earth's shadows, not a thing, fresh or withered, but it is in a Book Manifest." For Rāzī, this Qur'ānic phrase also engages the faculty of imagination. When the faculty of imagination apprehends that a grain is a miniscule thing and that the shadows on earth are vast and without measure, it prompts the intellect to realize that nothing in the world of perception is altered without God's knowledge. By adopting this mode of instruction, the Qur'ān reinforces the idea that is encapsulated in the Qur'ānic phrase "With Him are the keys to the Unseen," which is that God's knowledge encompasses the totality of objects that can be known.<sup>66</sup>

64. Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 13:10.

65. Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 13:10; Lagarde, *Les secrets de l'invisible*, 236–237.

66. Lagarde, *Les secrets de l'invisible*, 236–237.

My analysis of Rāzī's exegesis of Qur'ān 6, 59 confirms a hypothesis initially proposed by Lagarde. In Rāzī's view, the Qur'ān communicates its teachings by appealing to the faculties of intellect and imagination. It furthermore confirms that the Qur'ān presents its ideas didactically, since it conveys symbols methodically and logically such that each verse corroborates the one before it. The logical procedure and didactic procedure that I have described above give the Qur'ān's method its preeminence (or, in Rāzī's theological terms, its *divine eloquence*). For Rāzī, the preeminent eloquence of the Qur'ān's divine discourse prevents "preoccupation with objections and contradictions" (to quote his *Testament*) that result from the discursive methods that are employed in philosophy (*falsafa*) and theology (*kalām*).

I turn now to a second example from *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* that casts light on Rāzī's theory of the Qur'ān's preeminent method. It is Rāzī's view that the Throne verse (2, 255) presents the most perfect (*akmal*) metaphysical model of God and His relation to the world. In his commentary, Rāzī claims that this model is the clearest of proofs (*burhān*), and he implies that this Qur'ānic proof surpasses those that have been formulated by the Muslim philosophers (*falāsifa*) and theologians (*mutakallimūn*). (To my knowledge, none of Rāzī's predecessors in the *tafsīr* tradition make this argument for the Qur'ān's logical procedure in their commentaries on this verse.)<sup>67</sup> He furthermore counts it among the "secrets" (*asrār*) that God has embedded in the Qur'ān for human intellects to discover. While Lagarde has recently explicated Rāzī's exegesis of this verse in order to show how he works out the Qur'ān's logical presentation of metaphysical ideas, in the following discussion I dissect Rāzī's exegesis in order to argue that, in his view, the symbols conveyed by the Throne Verse substantiate the Avicennian philosophical paradigm of God and His relationship to the world; and that conversely, the Avicennian metaphysical model of God and His relationship to the world confirms the symbols that are conveyed by the Qur'ānic Throne Verse.<sup>68</sup> In my analysis I underscore the ways that scriptural wisdom and Avicennian philosophical reason reinforce one another in Rāzī's system of thought. (In chapter four, when I discuss the Light Verse I will have more to say about how Rāzī integrated Avicennian concepts and principles into Sunnī *tafsīr*.) Before explicating these elements

67. See for example, Māturīdī, *Ta'wilāt ahl al-sunna*, 2:124; Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kashshāf*, 2:24.

68. Lagarde, *Les secrets de l'invisible*, 63–65.

that show how the interdependence of Qur'ānic symbols and philosophical reasoning I should mention briefly that when Rāzī comments on this verse, he intends to counter the strongly anthropomorphic understanding of it that was advanced by Karrāmīte opponents, who hold that God is (exclusively) above the Throne.<sup>69</sup> The Throne Verse reads as follows:

God  
 There is not god but He, the  
 Living, the Sustainer.  
 Slumber seizes Him not, neither Sleep;  
 To Him belongs  
 All that is in the heavens and the earth.  
 Who is there that shall intercede with Him save by His leave?  
 He knows what lies before them and what is after them,  
 And they comprehend not anything of His knowledge save such as He wills.  
 His Throne comprises the heavens and the earth;  
 the preserving of them oppresses Him not;  
 He is the All-High, the All-Glorious.<sup>70</sup>

When Rāzī comments on this verse, he implies that the Qur'ānic model of God that is expressed in the symbols of the Throne Verse (including the divine names) is substantiated by “the decisive proofs of the intellect” (*al-barāhīn al-ʿaqliyya al-qitāʿiyya*).<sup>71</sup> In his exegesis he discloses the various ways that the symbols of the Throne verse confirm the intellectual proofs that are established by Avicennian philosophical reason. To understand how Rāzī discovers correspondences between Qur'ānic symbols and philosophical reason, I highlight the equivalences of meaning that he establishes between *lexical* items in the Throne Verse and Avicennian *philosophical* concepts and

69. On the Karrāmites, see van Ess, *Ungenützte Texte zur Karrāmiya: Eine Materialsammlung*, passim; *Encyclopedia of Islam* (second edition), Bosworth, “The Rise of the Karrāmiyah in Khorasan,” 5–14; “Karrāmiyya,” 4:667–669 (C. E. Bosworth); Zysow, “Two Unrecognized Karrāmī Texts,” 577–587; Gilliot, “Les sciences coraniques chez les Karrāmites du Khorasan: Le Livre des Fondations,” 18–81.

70. Trans. Arberry (with a slight modification). The commentaries by Ṭabarī and Nisābūrī on the Throne verse are translated by Monnot in “Le Verset du Trone,” 119–144.

71. Rāzī, *Maḥāṭib al-ghayb*, 7:3. On Rāzī's use of the term “creator” (and related Qur'ānic terms) see McAuliffe, “Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī on God as Khāliq,” 276–296.



principles. By underscoring such equivalences of meaning, we can infer that, for Rāzī, Qur'ānic symbols of the Throne Verse and Avicennian philosophical ideas substantiate each other. We can also infer that the Qur'ān's method of communicating ideas (what Lagarde calls the pattern of divine logic), including the logical manner in which it orders, presents, and arranges its ideas about God and his relation to the world, corresponds with the Avicennian philosophical method of reasoning. Let us now examine the particulars of Rāzī's exegesis of the Throne Verse.

### i. The Living

When Rāzī comments on the divine epithet, *al-ḥayy* ("the Living"), he adopts the conventional interpretation of the Muslim theologians. As Gimaret notes in his study on the divine names, the "Living" was considered a divine perfection as well as a precondition for the additional divine attributes—power, knowledge, hearing, seeing, willing, and speaking. The Mu'tazila (in particular Abū Hāshim al-Jubbā'ī and Abū 'Alī al-Jubbā'ī) had understood "living" to refer to "that which is susceptible to being powerful and knowing," since living creatures are distinguishable from non-living objects by the faculties of knowledge and power (or the capacities to know and act).<sup>72</sup> Following this theological exposition of the divine names, Rāzī interprets the divine epithet, *al-ḥayy*, to mean that God is "the actively perceiving" (*al-darrāk al-fā'āl*), since this name signifies His being knowing and powerful.<sup>73</sup> Thus, here the equivalence of meanings that Rāzī establishes is between *al-darrāk al-fā'āl* ("The Actively Perceiving") and God's being knowing and powerful.

### ii. The Sustainer

Rāzī's interpretation of the divine name, *al-qayyūm* ("the Sustainer"), is even more telling of his view that the Qur'ān's method of communicating ideas

72. Gimaret, *Les noms divins*, 229–230.

73. Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 7:4; *Lawāmi' al-bayyināt*, 305. On the divine names and attributes in Islamic theology, see *Encyclopedia of the Qur'ān*, "God and his Attributes," 2:316–330; *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, "Al-Asmā' al-ḥusnā." On the divine names and attributes in classical

conforms to the logic of Avicennian philosophical reason. When Rāzī comments on this divine epithet, he argues that it confirms the “decisive proofs of the intellect” (*al-barāhīn al-‘aqliyya al-qita’iyya*), that is, that it corroborates the proof established by human philosophical reason. What he means by this is that the lexical sense of the divine name *al-qayyūm*, which is established by the commentarial tradition, is consonant with the Avicennian philosophical model of God and His relationship to the world. As we shall see, Rāzī shows the equivalence of these meanings in both *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* and *Lawāmi‘ al-bayyināt*.

In the view of classical commentators, the divine epithet *al-qayyūm* refers to God’s guardianship or vigilance over His creation. Relying on the authority of prophetic traditions that can be traced to Ibn ‘Abbās, Qatāda, and Zujjāj, the commentators Ṭabarī and Ṭusī propose these interpretations on the grounds that the term *qayyūm* is derived from *qāma bi*, which means “to be in charge of” or alternatively, *qāma ‘alā*, which means “to be attentive to or take care of.”<sup>74</sup> For Rāzī, these lexical meanings confirm the Avicennian model of God and His relationship to the world. In both *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* and *Lawāmi‘ al-bayyināt*, Rāzī establishes the equivalence of the lexical and philosophical meanings. In the former text he writes:

The Necessary through Itself is self-subsistent (*qā'im bi-dhātihī*) and is the cause for the sustainment (*taqawwum*) of all that is other than It in its quiddity and its existence. So, He is *al-qayyūm al-ḥayy* in relation to all existents, since *al-qayyūm* is the one who subsists through Himself, and the one who sustains every other being in its quiddity and existence. Because He is the Necessary Existent through His essence, He is the true *al-qayyūm* in relation to all.<sup>75</sup>

Rāzī’s interpretation of the divine name, *al-qayyūm*, betrays Ghazālī’s influence. As Gimaret notes in his study of the divine names, Ghazālī had extended this epithet to mean “to exist” or “to subsist.”<sup>76</sup> In the above selection Rāzī proposes that the divine epithet, *al-qayyūm* (“the Sustainer”),

Islamic theology, see Allard, *Le problème des attributs divins*, passim; Gimaret, *Les noms divins*, passim. Wisnovsky, “One Aspect of the Avicennian Turn in Sunnī Theology,” 65–100.

74. Gimaret, *Les noms divins*, 188.

75. Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 7:4.

76. Gimaret, *Les noms divins*, 189.

refers to God, the Necessary Existent who subsists by virtue of Himself and who *sustains* all contingent entities by causing them to exist. He argues that *because* the Necessary Existent sustains entities in existence, *al-qayyūm* is an apt label for God. Thus, for Rāzī, the lexical sense of *al-qayyūm*, which is that God is continually attentive to His creation, is conceptually equivalent to the Avicennian philosophical metaphysical principle that God continually causes the existence of contingent entities.<sup>77</sup>

In *Lawāmi' al-bayyināt* Rāzī advances a similar interpretation of the divine epithet, *al-qayyūm*.<sup>78</sup> He distinguishes between necessary and contingent being, and he argues that God is the Necessary Existent who causes the existence of all things. It is noteworthy that, in his view, the Qur'ān names God *al-qayyūm* because He is “the cause of the sustainment of everything that is other than Him.” As in *Mafātiḥ al-ghayb*, Rāzī here implies that God's being attentive to His creation is conceptually equivalent to God's being the sustainer (*muqawwim*) of all that is other than Him.<sup>79</sup> By naming God *al-qayyūm* the Qur'ān thus confirms the Avicennian philosophical principle that God is the only self-subsistent entity (*qā'imān bi-dhātihī*) and the only self-sufficient being, on whom the existence of all things depend. Thus, for Rāzī, the Avicennian model of the Necessary Existent serves as the decisive evidence for the scriptural epithet, *al-qayyūm*. Conversely, *al-qayyūm* serves as a justification for the Avicennian philosophical model of God as the Necessary Existent who sustains the existence of all contingent entities.

### iii. Slumber Seizes Him Not, Neither Sleep

When Rāzī interprets the Qur'ānic phrase “Slumber seizes Him not, neither Sleep,” he establishes equivalences of meaning between Qur'ānic lexical items and Avicennian philosophical ideas. By doing so, he implies that the Qur'ānic symbols of the Throne Verse and Avicennian philosophical concepts and principles confirm and reinforce each other. In Rāzī's exegesis,

77. Rāzī, *Mafātiḥ al-ghayb*, 7:6.

78. The structure of Rāzī's treatise on the divine names has been analyzed by Anawati in “Un traité des noms divins de Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, Le *Lawāmi' al-bayyināt fī'l-asmā' wa'l-ṣifāt*,” 36–52.

79. Rāzī, *Al-Lawāmi' al-bayyināt*, 305.

the lexical meaning of the Qur'ānic phrase "Slumber seizes Him not, neither Sleep," is that God manages His creation. To communicate the way that God "attends to and protects His creation," the Qur'ān analogizes God's relationship to His creation to that of a guardian to his child. Just as a guardian attends continuously to his child, who would be weakened if the guardian were to neglect him, so also God perpetually oversees His creation.<sup>80</sup>

Rāzī holds that the lexical meaning of the Qur'ānic phrase, "Slumber seizes Him not, neither Sleep," substantiates (*akkada*) two philosophical ideas within the Avicennian paradigm of metaphysics. Taking his cue from his predecessor, Ghazālī, he begins by extending the lexical and conventional meaning of *qawwama* to signify "to subsist" or "to exist." Subsequently, he interprets the divine epithet, *al-qayyūm*, to refer to the Avicennian concept that God is the Necessary Existent being who subsists through Himself (*fa-l-qayyūm huwwa al-mutaqawwim bi-dhātihī* or simply *qā'iman bi-dhātihī*); and to the Avicennian principle that God continuously sustains all contingent entities in the cosmos by bestowing existence on them (*al-muqawwim li-kulli mā 'adāhu/muqawwiman li-ghayrihī*).<sup>81</sup> By proposing such equivalences of meaning, Rāzī implies that the Avicennian philosophical model of God, which is established by "decisive intellectual proofs" (*al-barāhīn al-'aqliyya al-qitā'iyya*), serves as decisive rational evidence for the scriptural epithet, *al-qayyūm* ("the Sustainer"); and conversely, he implies that the Sustainer is thus an apt description of God *because* it is confirmed by the Avicennian philosophical model. As in the previous instances that we have analyzed, the symbols of the Qur'ānic phrase "Slumber seizes Him not, neither Sleep" and Avicennian philosophical ideas confirm and reinforce each other.

#### iv. To Him Belongs All that Is in the Heavens and the Earth

Just as Rāzī establishes philosophical equivalents for the Qur'ānic phrase "Slumber seizes Him not, neither Sleep," he also creates philosophical

80. Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 7:6.

81. Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 7:4; *Al-Lawāmi' al-bayyināt*, 305.

equivalents for the Qur'ānic expression "To Him belongs All that is in the heavens and the earth." While he interprets the former Qur'ānic expression to refer to God's role as the sustainer of the cosmos and its entities, he interprets the latter to refer to God's rank as the supreme ruler over all entities in the cosmos.

What is significant about Rāzī's exegesis of the Qur'ānic phrase "To Him belongs All that is in the heavens and the earth," is that it discloses his understanding of the Qur'ān's logical method of communicating ideas. Here Rāzī implies that the Qur'ān proceeds logically, since it presents metaphysical ideas in such a way that each idea confirms the one preceding it. Moreover, he implies that the Qur'ān's systematic presentation of ideas testifies to the preeminent way that it arranges its verses.<sup>82</sup> In his exegesis, Rāzī argues that the reason the Qur'ān presents the phrase "Slumber seizes Him not, neither Sleep" *before* the phrase "To Him belongs all that is in the heavens and the earth" is that the latter verse is logically implied by the former; it is *because* contingent entities come into existence through God's creative act, and because they owe their existence to Him, that they fall within His dominion of the heavens and the earth.<sup>83</sup> For Rāzī, the Qur'ānic phrase "To Him belongs all that is in the heavens and the earth," is thus a divine decree (*ḥukm*) that serves as scriptural evidence for the Avicennian philosophical idea that God sustains the existence of all entities in the heavens and the earth.

What conclusions can one draw about Rāzī's understanding of the Qur'ān's method (and about his overall methodology) on the basis of his exegesis of the Throne Verse?

My analysis confirms that Rāzī holds that a pattern of logical reasoning is embedded in the order and arrangement of Qur'ānic ideas. Further, it confirms that Rāzī affirms that the Qur'ān's pattern of reasoning (which Lagarde aptly calls "the divine logic of the Qur'ān") conforms to the human intellect's procedure of logical reasoning and to the decisive proofs that the intellect establishes. In contrast to the modes of reasoning that Rāzī employed in the disciplines of theology (*kalām*) and philosophy (*falsafā*), however, the Qur'ān configures rational metaphysical ideas methodically

82. For an extensive discussion of Rāzī's views on the Qur'ān's systematic arrangement of verses, see Lagarde, *Les secrets de l'invisible*, 425ff.

83. Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 7:6.

and logically.<sup>84</sup> The logical procedure or methodical ordering of ideas embedded in the Qur'ān thus give it an unparalleled eloquence. And it is for this reason that Rāzī (in his *Testament* that I quoted earlier) claims to have found the Qur'ān's method more profitable and superior to the rationalistic methods that he employed in *kalām* and *falsafa*.

My analysis also casts light on the relationship between philosophical knowledge and scriptural wisdom in Rāzī's system of thought. In Rāzī's view, these two sources of knowledge not only conform to one another, but they also confirm and reinforce one another. We have seen that the Qur'ān's pattern of reasoning in the Throne Verse conforms perfectly to the human intellect's mode of discursive reasoning. Moreover, we have seen that the model of God that is evinced in the Qur'ān's Throne Verse and the Avicennian philosophical model of the Necessary Existent confirm and reinforce one another by serving as decisive evidence of each other. My analysis of Rāzī's expatiation on the Throne Verse thus provides a classic example of how, in his view, philosophical knowledge derives its authority from the Qur'ān, and conversely, the Qur'ān's metaphysical ideas derive their authority from Avicennian philosophical knowledge. And finally, it provides a classic example of how Rāzī reconciled the *'aqlī* and *naqlī* traditions of knowledge in medieval Islam.

84. Rāzī, *Maḥāṭib al-ghayb*, 7:6.

## CHAPTER TWO

# DEVISING RULES OF EXEGESIS



This chapter challenges a widely shared assumption about Rāzī.<sup>1</sup> The vast majority of secondary literature on Rāzī in European languages classifies him as an Ashʿarite. This is understandable, given that Rāzī falls within the genealogical tradition of Ashʿarism, and the bio-bibliographers of medieval Islam trace Rāzī's intellectual pedigree to Ashʿarī himself. To say that Rāzī is an Ashʿarite, however, overlooks the extent to which he was influenced by the highly unorthodox views of the Muʿtazila, who after being branded as heretics in Baghdad, migrated east and settled in Central Asia. Rāzī's considerable debt to the Muʿtazila, and the extent to which he incorporated crucial Muʿtazilite methods into his theology, goes almost completely unacknowledged in most of the Western literature on Islamic religious thought. Only Goldziher (1912) seems to have noted Rāzī's debt to the Muʿtazila.<sup>2</sup> The absence of scholarly investigations into Muʿtazilite influence

1. Chapter two uses material from the author's article "Muʿtazilite Aspects of Fakhr al- Dīn al- Rāzī's Thought," *Arabica* 59, no. 5, 2012 originally published by Brill.

2. Mourad has recently pointed to Rāzī's dependence on a Muʿtazilite Qurʾān commentary, namely *Al-Kashshāf* by Zamakhsharī. See Mourad, "The Survival of the Muʿtazila Tradition of Qurʾānic Exegesis in Shīʿī and Sunnī *tafāsīr*," 83–108. In his foundational article on Rāzī, Goldziher formally addresses this issue and hypothesizes that the Muʿtazila did in fact positively influence Rāzī's thought. See Goldziher, "Aus der Theologie des Fachr

on Rāzī is all the more surprising given that Ibn Taymiyya—the great polemicist and perspicacious reader of Islamic theology—recognized this influence and marked it as pivotal in the history of Islamic thought.<sup>3</sup>

This chapter proposes that the basic outlook of Rāzī's methodology is strongly Mu'tazilite. To illustrate this I examine one fundamental aspect of Rāzī's thought that points to his adoption of Mu'tazilite methodology and his rejection of classical Ash'arite thought, namely the authoritative role he assigns to reason as a source of religious knowledge. While the Mu'tazila argued for the free and unrestricted use of human reasoning and considered it the primary source of religious knowledge, many Ash'arite theologians from Ash'arī through Ghazālī insisted on the limited function of reason as a source of religious knowledge. Indeed, in the view of classical Ash'arism, the Qur'an and Sunna constituted sources of religious knowledge that were authoritative and functioned as the ultimate arbiters of theological questions.

In this chapter, I argue that Rāzī assigns an authoritative role to human reasoning as a source of religious knowledge. By doing so, he rejects the idea that the Qur'an and Sunna constitute sources of religious knowledge that must be uncritically followed and strictly adhered to—a salient feature of classical Ash'arism. What Rāzī did was to rearrange the sources of religious knowledge along Mu'tazilite lines with human reasoning as its leading source and to limit the weight of the Qur'an and Sunna as sources of religious knowledge and arbiters of theological questions. By ranking these sources along Mu'tazilite lines, Rāzī developed Ash'arism into a trend that

al-Dīn al-Rāzī," 213–247. None of the following works addresses the Mu'tazilite influence on Rāzī's methodology, and none argues that the fundamental outlook of Rāzī's methodology is strongly Mu'tazilite: "Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī" *Encyclopedia of Islam* (second edition), 2:751–755 (G. C. Anawati); Kholeif, *A Study on Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī and his Controversies in Transoxiana*; Kraus, "Les controverses de Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī," 187–214; Jomier, "L'autorité de la révélation et la raison dans le commentaire du Coran de Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī," 245–261; Griffel, "Al-Gazali's Concept of Prophecy: The Introduction of Avicennan Psychology Into Ash'arite Theology," 101–144; Abrahamov, "Religion versus Philosophy. The Case of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's Proof of Prophecy," 415–215. El-Tobgui's article deals with some of the passage that I translate and analyze. It only came to my attention in 2013, and I was unable to take it into account.

3. Ibn Taymiyya, *Bayān talbīs al-Jahmiyya fī ta'sīs bida'ihim al-kalāmiyya, aw, Naqd ta'sīs al-Jahmiyya*, 4:127.



continued to view and use the Qurʾān and Sunna as sources of knowledge but rejected the idea that they were the ultimate arbiters of theological issues. This methodology, which gave priority to reason over scripture, became a fundamental methodological characteristic of Sunnī thought in the post-classical period.<sup>4</sup>

## 2.1 RĀZĪ'S ENGAGEMENT WITH THE MUʿTAZILA

Rāzī initially encountered the Muʿtazila as a young man, and he remained preoccupied with them until his death. The bio-bibliographical sources, which provide some crucial details about Rāzī's life and the patronage that he received, indicate that Rāzī initially encountered the Muʿtazila in Khwarazm before he traveled to Transoxiana, and that his debates with the Muʿtazila led to his exile from the region.<sup>5</sup> Khwarazm had recently witnessed a revival of Muʿtazilite theology, and the prominence of Muʿtazilite material in Rāzī's work is partially due to his setting in life and his oral debates with the Muʿtazila.<sup>6</sup>

There is plenty of evidence that the Muʿtazila should be counted among Rāzī's chief opponents, and I do not wish to bring this into question. Here are just a few examples that illustrate this. The Muʿtazila feature as Rāzī's opponents in the *Muḥaṣṣal*, in which Rāzī opposed the Muʿtazila on the

4. That the priority of reason was a fundamental characteristic of Rāzī's methodology is pointed out by Ibn Taymiyya, Rāzī's greatest opponent. See Ibn Taymiyya, *Dar' al-tā'arud al-ʿaql wa-l-naql*, 1:22.

5. Rāzī's expulsion from Khwarazm is noted in the following sources: Ibn Ḥallikān (d. 681/1282), *Kitāb Wafāyāt al-a'yān wa-anbā' abnā' al-zamān*, 4:250; Šafadī (d. 764/1362–3), *Kitāb al-wāfi bi-l-wafāyāt*, 4:249; Subkī (d. 771/1370), *Ṭabāqāt al-šāfi'iyya al-kubrā*, 8:86; Ṭashkopruzāde (d. 968/1561), *Miftāḥ al-sāʾda wa-miṣbāḥ al-siyāda*, 1:446. On the patronage Rāzī received, see Griffel, "On Faḥr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's Life and the Patronage He Received," 313–344.

6. Muʿtazilism spread to the region through Maḥmūd Jarīr Abū Muḍar al-Ḍabbī (d. 507/1113), a scholar who had immigrated to Khwarazm from Isfahan; Goldziher, "Aus der Theologie," 220. On the Muʿtazila, see "Muʿtazilah" in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 9: 6317–6325; "Muʿtazila" in *Encyclopedia of Islam* (second edition), 7: 783–793 (D. Gimaret). On Muʿtazila and ethics, see now Vasalou, *Moral Agents and Their Deserts. The Character of Muʿtazilite Ethics*, passim. For an introduction to Muʿtazilite hermeneutics, see Fudge, *Qurʾānic Hermeneutics*, 114–142.

following theological topics: the nature of God's Attributes;<sup>7</sup> vision of God in the next world<sup>8</sup>; the return of the non-existent;<sup>9</sup> spontaneous generation;<sup>10</sup> prophetic immunity from error and sin;<sup>11</sup> and the promise and the threat.<sup>12</sup> The Mu'tazila also feature as Rāzī's opponents in *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*. Rāzī's debates with the Mu'tazila are woven into the fabric of his commentary, and in many of these Rāzī argues against the Mu'tazila.<sup>13</sup> On the question whether God's word is created or uncreated, for example, Rāzī opposes the Mu'tazilite doctrine that God's word is not God's direct speech but "created speech" that consists of "arranged letters and sounds." He took the more orthodox position that God's word is an eternal attribute subsisting in God's essence.<sup>14</sup> In his autobiographical account of his debates in Transoxiana, Rāzī rejects the Mu'tazilite position that God could not be seen in the next world, adopting the opposing Ash'arite position on the authority of scripture.<sup>15</sup>

What I do wish to bring into question is Rāzī's debt to Mu'tazilite methodology. To illustrate this I examine Rāzī's adoption of Mu'tazilite theological assumptions and interpretive methods. I focus on Rāzī's borrowing of Mu'tazilite *ta'wīl*—the figurative interpretation Qur'ānic verses and prophetic reports. Given that this issue (which I call the *ta'wīl*-issue) developed out of theological reflection about God's nature, some remarks about how the controversy concerning scriptural interpretation is tied to theological reflection will be appropriate.

Muslim theologians of all stripes shared the assumption that God is unlike His creation and that the attributes of created being cannot be ascribed to

7. Rāzī, *Muḥaṣṣal*, 257, 307, 289–290, 302.

8. Rāzī, *Muḥaṣṣal*, 316.

9. Rāzī, *Muḥaṣṣal*, 390.

10. Rāzī, *Muḥaṣṣal*, 335–336.

11. Rāzī, *Muḥaṣṣal*, 368–369.

12. Rāzī, *Muḥaṣṣal*, 397–398.

13. Rāzī absorbed much of this material through Zamakhsharī's Qur'ān commentary, a work that represented the last outspoken voice of the Mu'tazila in Central Asia. The prominent Mu'tazilites who feature in Rāzī's commentary include Abū 'Alī l-Jubbā'ī (d. 303/915), Abū Hāshim al-Jubbā'ī (d. 321/933), Abū Ishāq al-Nazzām (d. 230/845), 'Abd al-Jabbār (d. 415/1025) and Abū l-Ḥusayn al-Baṣrī (d. 436/1044), whose doctrines seem to have been current in Khwarazm. But it is likely that he was aware of their views as quoted in a Mu'tazilite *tafsīr*. On this and Rāzī's use of Zamakhsharī, see Mourad, "The Survival of the Mu'tazila Tradition of Qur'anic Exegesis in Shī'ī and Sunnī *tafsīr*, 83–108.

14. Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 1:36; 10:218; 24:244.

15. Kholeif, *A Study on Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī*, 122.

God, since to do so would render Him contingent. The problem they faced, however, was that the canonical sources—the Qurʾān and Sunna—are strongly anthropomorphic and seem to indicate that God resembles His contingent creation.<sup>16</sup> The Qurʾān and Sunna speak of God’s “hand” or “hands,” God’s “descent,” God’s “being above,” His “coming” and “going,” and His sitting on the Throne. These descriptions were considered “problematic,” since they seemed to indicate that God is in a direction or location and that God resembles a manlike corporeal entity. The principle of likening God to His contingent creation was called *tashbīh*. Falling into *tashbīh* was considered a theological error, and in some controversies the principle was considered a litmus test for heresy.<sup>17</sup> The problem they faced can be formulated in the frame of a question: How can one maintain the reality of the anthropomorphic descriptions of God without falling into *tashbīh* and thereby compromising the core theological principle that God is unlike His contingent creation?

The scriptural controversy concerning *taʾwīl* developed out of theological reflection about the *tashbīh*-problem. The root of the controversy concerned the weighting of the sources of religious knowledge. Traditionalists, who recognized only the Qurʾān and Sunna as canonical and authoritative sources, argued that one is obliged to adhere strictly to the apparent sense of the Qurʾān and Sunna on the grounds that God has revealed Himself using these names and attributes. According to this doctrine, one is compelled to accept such attributes “as they really are” by leaving them in their apparent sense. The Muʿtazila, who claimed to use only human reasoning as the source of religious knowledge, argued that such verses and reports (when taken in their apparent sense) do not befit God, and that accordingly, one must apply *taʾwīl*—that is, interpret anthropomorphic phrases figuratively.

## 2.2 THE OPPONENTS OF MUʿTAZILITE TAʾWĪL

Rāzī’s debt to Muʿtazilite methodology is especially conspicuous in *Āsās al-taqdīs*.<sup>18</sup> This work is devoted entirely to the *taʾwīl*-issue—the question

16. Van Ess, “Tashbih wa-tanzīh,” *EP*, 10:341–344.

17. This seems to have been especially true within Traditionalism. See, for example, Ibn Qudāma (d. 1223), *Censure of Speculative Theology*.

18. Rāzī dedicated *Tāʾsīs al-taqdīs* to the brother of Saladin, Al-Mālik al-ʿādil Sayf al-dīn Abū Bakr b. al-Ayyūb (r. 596/1199–615/1218). He composed this work in the late period of his

whether it is permissible to interpret the Qur'ān and prophetic reports figuratively by diverting their apparent sense to a nonapparent or figurative sense. What Rāzī does in this treatise is to adopt the Mu'tazilite conception of *ta'wīl* (and its underlying theological assumptions) to counter his Traditionalist Ḥanbalite opponents who opposed the use of *ta'wīl*. Because Rāzī's adoption of Mu'tazilite *ta'wīl* is a response to Islamic traditionalism, and to what he considered its flawed methodology, it will be appropriate to say something about this methodology.

Traditionalist methodology approached the *tashbīḥ*-problem with two assumptions. The first is that God revealed Himself to mankind using the names and attributes expressed in the Qur'ān and Sunna; the second is that only the Qur'ān and Sunna (and not human reasoning) constitute sources of religious knowledge, and that only these sources provide knowledge of God's being and attributes. Accordingly, one is obliged to affirm the names and attributes of God and to leave them "as they are" by not diverting them from their apparent sense to a figurative sense through the application of *ta'wīl*.

Like other theologians, however, Traditionalists were committed to avoiding *tashbīḥ*—likening God to His creation. They approached this issue by postulating that although the anthropomorphic descriptions of God are real, they are beyond the ken of the imagination and intellect. They thus bear no likeness to created attributes. For example, the Ḥanbalites affirm a face and hand of God "in a different sense to that which it is established of creation." Addressing the Ḥanbalite approach to the problematic verses, Rāzī states:

The mainstay of the Ḥanbalites' way is that whenever they hold fast to a Qur'ānic verse or prophetic report, the apparent sense which suggests something of organs and limbs [of some kind], they explicitly declare that "we affirm this meaning of God the exalted in a different sense to that which it is established for creation." Thus, they affirm of God the exalted a Face different from the faces of creatures, and a Hand different from the hands of creatures. Yet, it is known that the Hand and the Face, with the meanings they have mentioned,

career between 1199 and 1210 while he was in Ghazna (ca. 602/1205), or possibly in Herat, a few years before he died and called it "a brilliant gem and a pleasing gift." According to Ḥājji Khalifa's *Kashf al-zunūn*, the correct title of the work is *Ta'sīs al-taqdīs*. Rāzī, too, refers to the work as *Ta'sīs al-taqdīs* in his own works; Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*; 21:7.

are such as the imagination and conjecture cannot accept. So, if it is reasonable to affirm that, [in a manner] different from conjecture and imagination, then what farfetchedness is there in the statement that God the exalted exists, and is neither in the world nor outside the world, even though conjecture and imagination fall short of fathoming this existence.<sup>19</sup>

The Ḥanbalite position posits that the anthropomorphic verses and reports are indeed real. It is thus true to say that God has a Hand and Face, just as it is true that He is “above” and that He is “sitting on the Throne.” But since, in their view, God’s essence differs from the essences of sensory things, when one affirms these descriptions of God, one is not affirming an attribute of created entities to God and one is not falling into *tashbīḥ*. Consequently, according to this group, it is not necessary to apply *ta’wīl* to the anthropomorphic descriptions of God since when one affirms such verses or reports of God, one is not affirming a created attribute of Him.

To counter his opponents’ view on *ta’wīl* Rāzī adopts a strategy that aims to establish the necessity of *ta’wīl*. This strategy is reflected in these sections of the text: (1) The Evidences that God Transcendent is above corporeality and spatial location; (2) On the [Metaphorical] Interpretation of the “ambiguous” (*mutashābihāt*) Qur’ānic verses and prophetic reports (Prologue and 32 sections); (3) An Account of the way of the Pious Ancestors; (4) Remaining Issues.

The Mu’tazilite imprint on Rāzī’s methodology is clear from the contents of the work. Section (1) argues for the Mu’tazilite position that God is “above corporeality and spatial location”—that God is not in a direction or a space-occupying entity.<sup>20</sup> Here Rāzī advances “proofs” based on textual evidence and rational evidence that God cannot be pointed to by the senses, since He is neither “here” nor “there” and thus not in a direction or location. Section (2) is also strongly Mu’tazilite. It argues that the apparent sense of the anthropomorphic verses and reports does not befit God, and that as a result, the apparent sense cannot be the intended meaning of scripture, which must be interpreted figuratively through the application of *ta’wīl*.<sup>21</sup>

19. Rāzī, *Ta’sis al-taqdīs*, 9–10; I am grateful to my colleague S. Laher for bringing this passage to my attention and for our conversations about Rāzī and Ibn Taymiyya.

20. Rāzī, *Ta’sis al-taqdīs*, 16–45.

21. Rāzī, *Ta’sis al-taqdīs*, 79–173.

## 2.3 RĀZĪ'S CRITIQUE OF CLASSICAL ASH'ARISM

Rāzī's borrowing of Mu'tazilite assumptions and interpretive methods also set him at odds with classical Ash'arism. The major trend among Rāzī's predecessors and colleagues within Ash'arism viewed the Qur'ān and Sunna as the leading, most important authoritative sources of religious knowledge on the *ta'wil*-issue, disallowing the use of human reasoning when it came to interpreting the anthropomorphic attributes. Rāzī flatly rejected this idea. He rearranged the authority of these sources by assigning more weight to human reasoning and by positioning human reasoning as the arbiter of the *ta'wil*-issue. By doing so, he rejected a salient feature of Ash'arism—the idea that one is obliged to follow scriptural authority—the Qur'ān and Sunna—and not use human reasoning to interpret the anthropomorphic descriptions that are expressed in the canonical sources. He replaced this with the free and unrestricted use of human reasoning, a salient characteristic of Mu'tazilism.<sup>22</sup>

Before turning to Rāzī's borrowing of Mu'tazilite assumptions and interpretive methods, it will be appropriate to describe the Ash'arite methodology that Rāzī critiques. Like Traditionalists and the Mu'tazila, the Ash'arites faced the problem of *tashbih*, and their interpretive method developed out of the following problem: How can one maintain the reality of God's names and attributes such as “being above” and “He ascended the Throne” without falling into *tashbih*—that is, without ascribing the attributes of created being (contiguity, movement, direction, and so on) to Him?

The major trend within Ash'arism approached the *tashbih*-problem on the basis of several assumptions. The most important of these concerns the authority they invested in the Qur'ān and Sunna as divinely revealed sources. According to this view, God has described Himself in the Qur'ān and Sunna using names and attributes, including “Hand” (or “Hands”), for example. Because these names and attributes are divinely revealed, only these sources, namely the Qur'ān and Sunna, can sanction their interpretation. What this

22. That the rejection of the uncritical acceptance of authority became a salient feature of late Islamic theology is pointed out by Sabra in “Science and Philosophy in Medieval Islamic Theology: The Evidence of the Fourteenth Century,” 1–42.

meant, in effect, is that it is obligatory to accept the way that God described Himself by ascribing these selfsame names and attributes to Him and not applying *taʿwīl*, which is an interpretive method based on human reasoning. This view is expressed by Qushayrī (d. 465/1072), who represents a major trend in Ashʿarism:

We do not call God (He is Mighty and Glorious) by any name by which He has not called Himself. We believe in all the adjectives and nouns that are mentioned in describing Him. In this we follow the divine guidance found in the Scripture, the sunna, and the consensus of the community. We do not, in any case of naming [Him], follow what is appropriate for Him [simply] on the basis of inferential reasoning or from the standpoint of lexicography and grammar.<sup>23</sup>

In the above, Qushayrī addresses the four sources of religious knowledge in Ashʿarism: the Qurʾān, the Sunna, the consensus of the scholarly community, and human reasoning. He also defines the salient characteristic of the Ashʿarite position. The Qurʾān and Sunna are the authoritative sources of guidance on the *taʿwīl*-issue, and given that God has described Himself using names and attributes, one is obliged to accept the reality of these attributes. This entails, for example, affirming “ascension” and “movement” and “hand” (or “hands”) of Him and not substituting in figurative meanings, say by pointing to other instances in scripture or in the Arabic language more generally where these expressions are used figuratively.

Classical Ashʿarism thus posited that the anthropomorphic names and attributes are real rather than figurative. By this, the Ashʿarites meant that expressions such as “being above” and “He ascended the Throne” are true descriptions of God that name Him and tell us what He is really like. They are, moreover, *distinct*—they are not reducible to any of the other attributes, say “living” or “knowing,” that are established through human reasoning. The reality of the names and attributes became a theological postulate in classical Ashʿarism.

Before Rāzī, classical Ashʿarites resolved the problem of *tashbīh* (“likening God to His creation”) by positing that God had a singular nature. According to this theory, God’s essence differs from that of sensory beings. Thus, while

23. Frank, “Two Short Dogmatic Works of Abū l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī,” 68 (pt. 1).

it is correct to say that God does have a body, they claim, His body is unlike bodies that can be perceived by the five senses. In classical Ash'arism, this idea was linked to the scriptural verse "There is nothing Like Him [God]," (Qur'ān 42, 11) and it was expressed theologically in the formula that God cannot be captured by the imagination or intellect.<sup>24</sup>

In classical Ash'arism the interpretive method flowed from this theological postulate. The Ash'arites argued that *because* God's essence is different from the essence of sensory beings, the apparent sense of scripture cannot be scripture's intended meaning. That is, while certain verses and reports may seem to indicate direction or location on God's part, this is not the intended meaning and such descriptions are not to be read literally. Accordingly, in classical Ash'arism, when one ascribes "ascent" to God in the expression "And He [God] ascended the Throne" or "And the Merciful ascended the Throne," one is not affirming spatial motion of God. Similarly, when one ascribes "ascension" to God in the expression "And He ascended the Throne," one is not affirming "ascension" of God in the same way that one would affirm "ascension" of created entities. That Ash'arī himself insisted that spatial motion is not the intended meaning of verses and reports is expressed in the following:

[The Muslims] are agreed that God will come on the day of resurrection. . . as He has said. It is not, however, a going or a movement or a leaving. A going is a movement and a leaving only when that which goes is a body or atom and since it is certain that He (the Mighty, the Glorious) is neither a body nor an atom, His going must not be a local transference or a movement. Note that when they say, "the fever came to Zayd," they do not mean that it was transferred to him or that it has moved from a place in which it had been, since it is neither a body nor an atom; its coming to him is simply its existence in him. Nor is God's "descending" a transference, since He is neither a body nor an atom.<sup>25</sup>

The above passage expresses some of the theological assumptions and aspects of the interpretive method that became characteristic of classical Ash'arism. It assumes that the Qur'ān and Sunna are the leading authoritative sources of religious knowledge and that these sources govern the interpretation of the

24. Qushayrī, *Risāla*, trans. A. D. Knysh, UK, Garnet Publishing, 2007, 6–7.

25. Frank, "Elements in the Development of the Teaching of al-Ash'arī," 160; Ash'arī, *Al-Thaḡhr*, 73.



anthropomorphic descriptions of God. Following the lead of these sources meant, in effect, adhering to the apparent sense of such descriptions. Ash‘arī also expresses the idea that nothing characteristic of created beings is the intended meaning of the problematic descriptions. For example, the intended meaning of the description “going” is not a spatial movement. Similarly, the intended meaning of the description “descending” is not a spatial movement.

In the previous passage, it is also significant that according to classical Ash‘arite doctrine, human beings cannot attain precise knowledge of the names and attributes. That is, although the canonical sources—the Qur’ān and Sunna—indicate that the attributes are real (and not figurative) expressions, and that they must be taken in their apparent sense, their precise meaning is known only to God, and accordingly, it must be “entrusted to God,” to use Qushayrī’s expression.<sup>26</sup> The attributes were thus often said to be real *bī-la-kayf*—“without knowing how.” Rāzī rejected this epistemic stance by turning toward Mu‘tazilite theology.



Let me now address the conception of *ta’wīl* that Rāzī introduces into (what I call) “New Ash‘arism” or “Neo-Ash‘arism” that became characteristic of Islamic theological orthodoxy.<sup>27</sup> Rāzī’s conception of *ta’wīl* betrays characteristics that are strongly Mu‘tazilite. This is evinced in the epistemic framework of Rāzī’s *ta’wīl*, the theological assumptions of this framework and its interpretive method. These aspects, taken as a whole, indicate that Rāzī formally repudiated a salient characteristic of classical Ash‘arism, namely that the Qur’ān and Sunna—the canonical textual sources—constituted the leading and authoritative sources of religious knowledge.

The epistemic framework of Rāzī’s conception of *ta’wīl* considers human reasoning an autonomous source of religious knowledge. That is, human reasoning does not need the guidance of the Qur’ān and Sunna to attain religious knowledge but is fully capable of attaining such knowledge independently of

26. See Frank, “Two Short Dogmatic Works of Abū l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī,” 53–74 (pt. 1); 59–94 (pt. 2).

27. I have coined this expression on the basis of textual references to *muta‘akḥḥirūn* (“moderns”), a term that seems to refer to Ash‘arite theologians after Ghazālī. The term is used by Rāzī in the title of a theological work (*Muḥaṣṣal*). Ibn Taymiyya, too, uses the term to refer to Rāzī and his Ash‘arite colleagues.

them. This framework is borne out by Rāzī's approach to the *tashbih*-problem in part one of *Ta'sīs al-taqdīs*, which deals with "the evidences that God is above corporeality and spatial location." Here Rāzī flatly rejects the classical Ash'arite epistemic framework that grounds knowledge of God in strict adherence to the Qur'ān and Sunna and accordingly insists on the acceptance of the reality, or apparent sense, of the attributes. In opposition to this stance, Rāzī uses human reasoning to demonstrate that God is not in a direction or location. Many of the proofs he advances follow a line of reasoning that is characteristic of the Mu'tazila: Affirming the apparent sense of [God's] "being above," [God's] "ascending the Throne," and so on imply the affirmation of direction or location of God and compromise God's unity by likening Him to His contingent creation.

The theological assumptions and interpretive method of Rāzī's conception of *ta'wīl* are also strongly Mu'tazilite. These are evinced in part two of *Ta'sīs al-taqdīs*, which deals with the "metaphorical interpretation of the ambiguous (*mutashābihāt*) expressions of the Prophetic Reports and Qur'ānic verses."<sup>28</sup> Here Rāzī adopts an assumption characteristic of Mu'tazilism, namely that there can be no conflict between what human reasoning imparts about God, on the one hand, and what scripture—the Qur'ān and Sunna—impart about God on the other. By doing so, he continued the Mu'tazilite trend that aimed to harmonize reason and divine revelation. According to this postulate, God is knowable through human reasoning. God's being and attributes are discoverable through human reasoning, and what is expressed in scripture—including the anthropomorphic descriptions such as God's "being above," "hand" or "hands," and His "ascending the Throne"—conforms to the human conception of reasoning. The images must simply be "demythologized" through the proper use of reason, and *ta'wīl* is one of the functions of reason.<sup>29</sup>

In Rāzī's thought, the application of *ta'wīl* follows as a corollary of this theological assumption. The gist of his reasoning concerning *ta'wīl* runs as follows: (a) If the apparent sense of scripture is incongruous with the theological precepts that human reasoning establishes through rational evidence (for example, that God is not in a direction or location), the apparent sense of

28. Rāzī, *Ta'sīs al-taqdīs*, 79–173.

29. See, for instance, the discussion of the approach and methodology in *tafsīr* of five Mu'tazila exegetes in Mourad, "Towards a Reconstruction," and idem, "The Mu'tazila and

scripture is categorized as an impossibility; (b) Because scripture must conform to what human reasoning establishes, the intended sense of scripture cannot be a rational impossibility, and the intended sense of such descriptions must be their nonapparent sense; (c) Therefore, it is incumbent on the exegete to divert the apparent sense of the anthropomorphic descriptions to a nonapparent—figurative or allegorical—sense; otherwise there would be a direct conflict between what reason establishes and what scripture imparts.<sup>30</sup>

I call attention to two examples that illustrate Rāzī's conception of *ta'wīl*. The first comes from his discussion of the Qur'ānic phrase, "And He [God] ascended the Throne" and [God's] "being above," an expression referred to in ḥadīth literature.<sup>31</sup> Rāzī states:

The tenth argument is that decisive rational evidence that we mentioned above shows the falsity of God's being specified by any one of the directions. Once this is established, it is obvious that what is meant by "He ascended the Throne" is not "being established [sc. sitting in the manner of movement on God's part]," so it follows necessarily that the verse means "to become master of" or "to take possession of."<sup>32</sup>

The second issue that they mentioned is that it is necessary to adhere to the Qur'ānic verses that mention [God's] "being above." [Our] response to this is that the expression "being above" means [God's] high rank and power. The intended meaning of "being above" in these verses is [God's] dominance and power. If the term "above" carries the meaning of above in direction and above in rank, then why take it to mean above in direction?<sup>33</sup>

In this quote Rāzī establishes his interpretation of the anthropomorphic descriptions on the foundation of Mu'tazilite theological precepts that he sets

Their *Tafsīr* Tradition: A Comparative Study of Five Exegetical Glosses on Qur'ān 3, 178," 267–282.

30. The principle is noted by Rāzī's greatest opponent, Ibn Taymiyya, who places it prominently in his extremely lengthy refutation of Rāzī's methodology. See Ibn Taymiyya, *Dar' al-ta'arūḍ al-'aql wa-l-naql*, I, passim. On this subject, see Heer, "The Priority of Reason in the Interpretation of Scripture: Ibn Taymiyyah and the Mutakallimun," 181–195.

31. On the significance of the Throne in Islamic thought, see van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft*, 4:407–411.

32. Rāzī, *Ta'sīs al-taqdīs*, 156.

33. Rāzī, *Ta'sīs al-taqdīs*, 156–159.

out in part one of the treatise. These precepts are that God is “not specified by any one of the directions.” By this Rāzī means that God cannot be pointed to by the senses, since He is neither “here” nor “there.”<sup>34</sup> Once these precepts have been established on the basis of human reasoning, the problematic descriptions that seem to indicate that God is in a direction or location are categorized by Rāzī as impossibilities.

These precepts, having been established by “decisive rational evidence,” supply the foundation for Rāzī’s interpretive method. Rāzī thus interprets the Qur’ānic expression “And He ascended the Throne,” along Mu’tazilite lines. For example, the apparent sense of the Qur’ānic expression “And He ascended the Throne,” is “sitting,” which for Rāzī is an impossibility established through “decisive rational evidence.” If God were sitting on the Throne, then one part of God would occupy the right side of the Throne and another the left side of the Throne. But if so, God would be composite, and this is impossible. Consequently the intended meaning of “And He ascended the Throne” is not the apparent sense but the figurative sense—“to become master of” or “to take possession of.” The same goes for the expression “being above.” The intended meaning of this expression is not that God is in one of the six directions, namely “above,” since such an interpretation would conflict with what has been established through rational evidence, namely that God is not in a direction or location. Accordingly, Rāzī interprets this expression figuratively along Mu’tazilite lines to mean “dominance” and “power.” I call attention to a second example that illustrates Rāzī’s conception of *ta’wīl*. Rāzī’s exegesis of the Qur’ānic expression “My two hands” (38, 75), exemplifies Rāzī’s strongly Mu’tazilite assumptions and methods. The Qur’ānic verse in which this expression occurs refers to Adam’s preeminence over other human beings—only Adam is created with God’s two hands. This passage, like the earlier one, assumes that human reasoning is the suitable source to attaining religious knowledge about God and the arbiter of the meaning of the problematic descriptions. In the following, Rāzī applies *ta’wīl*—figurative interpretation—to the Qur’ānic expression “My two hands”:

We have made clear that [Adam’s] being created with [God’s] two hands is an expression for a special mode of creation with a superabundance of esteem

34. Rāzī, *Ta’sis al-taqdīs*, 45ff.

(*al-karamāt*) and honor (*al-tashrif*), and that God used these modes exclusively in Adam's creation.<sup>35</sup>

Here Rāzī rejects the idea that the Qur'ānic expression "My two hands" names a real attribute—namely, that scripture must be taken at its apparent sense. Most classical Ash'arites took the idea of Adam's preeminence as evidence that "hand" or "hands" names two attributes that subsist in God's essence. They argued that Adam is created through a special mode or act in which God bestows honor on Adam (*al-takrīm*) and singles him out by specially selecting him (*al-iṣṭifā'*).<sup>36</sup> Others take it to refer to power (*qudra*) as a real attribute. In the quoted text Rāzī rejects this stance, interpreting the verse figuratively along Mu'tazilite lines to refer to "a superabundance of esteem and honor."

## 2.4 RĀZĪ'S INTEGRATION OF THE MU'TAZILITE INTERPRETIVE METHOD INTO SUNNISM

Rāzī's turn toward Mu'tazilite lines of thinking and his rejection of classical Ash'arite methodology is complex and multifaceted, and the above discussion illustrates only one aspect of this complex turn. The following section focuses on an alternative aspect of this turn, namely the *philosophical* elements that Rāzī introduces into Mu'tazilite *ta'wīl*. In what is to follow, I propose that Rāzī upgraded and modernized Mu'tazilite *ta'wīl* by grounding it in Avicennian philosophical resources—resources that formed part of the Greek philosophical heritage and were later developed and refined by philosophical minds in medieval Islam.

The new conception of *ta'wīl* that Rāzī developed, and which became a salient characteristic of Sunnism, was a product of Rāzī's project that aimed to transfer philosophical concepts and methods across disciplinary boundaries. (I call this his *transfer of methods project*, although Rāzī himself does not describe his theological agenda using these terms.) This project, which Rāzī founded and engineered, succeeded in importing philosophical concepts and

35. Rāzī, *Ta'sīs al-taqdīs*, 129.

36. Rāzī, *Ta'sīs al-taqdīs*, 127.

methods into Qur'ānic exegesis (*tafsīr*), sometimes directly and at other times through the intermediary of Islamic theology (*kalām*). As I shall illustrate, it was through this transfer of methods project that Rāzī raised Ash'arism to higher philosophical standards. Moreover, it was through this project that Rāzī introduced, for the first time in the history of *tafsīr*, formal and systematic rules that grounded the interpretation of the Qur'ān and Sunna in philosophical concepts and principles.

This project was the first *substantial* attempt by a Muslim intellectual to reconfigure *tafsīr* by making effective use of Aristotelian-Avicennian philosophy. It made a major contribution to the grand project through which Muslim scholars, educated in religious learning, consolidated religious bodies of knowledge with philosophical and scientific learning. Although there were many religious thinkers working within the division of *falsafa* into *kalām* and who reconfigured Islamic theology along philosophical lines—Āmidī (d. 631/1233), Bayḍāwī (d. 685/1286), Ījī (d. 756/1355), Taftazānī (d. 792/1390), Jurjānī (d. 816/1413), and Sanūsī (d. 892/1487), to name a few—it was Rāzī who (within a single but voluminous Qur'ān commentary) reconfigured *tafsīr* along philosophical lines. And while the program in *kalām* began as early as Juwaynī (d. 478/1085),<sup>37</sup> *tafsīr* was a latecomer to this process. It was not until the twelfth century that philosophical resources were naturalized into Qur'ānic exegesis, and it is Rāzī who should be credited for founding and engineering this project.

Rāzī's effective use of philosophical resources in the Qur'ānic exegetical tradition was almost entirely new. Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144), Rāzī's immediate Central Asian predecessor in the *tafsīr* tradition, made no attempt to appropriate Avicennian philosophy and to naturalize it into *tafsīr*. Rather, his contributions lie in the realm of philology, and philology was the main resource he used to exegete the Qur'ān.<sup>38</sup> Ghazālī, Rāzī's immediate predecessor within

37. I have adopted the terms "appropriation" and "naturalization" from Sabra's article, "The Appropriation and Subsequent Naturalization of Greek Science in Medieval Islam: A Preliminary Statement," 223–243. On the nature of the philosophical turn in Islamic theology, see Wisnovsky, "The nature and scope of Arabic philosophical commentary in post-classical (ca. 1100–1900 AD) Islamic intellectual history: Some preliminary observations," 149–191.

38. That Zamakhsharī's contributions to *tafsīr* lie mainly in philology is noted by Saleh in *The Formation of the Classical Tafsīr Tradition*, 209–214.

the theological tradition, contributed to the appropriation and naturalization process in theology and law. But he did not undertake such a project in *tafsīr*. It was by picking up Ghazālī's thread that Rāzī started his program to transfer philosophical concepts and methods into *tafsīr*.

To upgrade and modernize Mu'tazilite *ta'wīl* Rāzī developed a new body of knowledge that he calls the science of interpretation (*'ilm al-ta'wīlāt*). This body of knowledge comprises formal and systematic rules that govern the interpretation of the canonical sources—the Qur'ān and Sunna. These rules are specifically designed to resolve the *ta'wīl*-issue. They do so by supplying a *criterion* for *ta'wīl* that sanctions its application and functions as a rationale for diverting scripture's apparent sense to a nonapparent sense.

The rules of Rāzī's science of interpretation assume a classification of verbal expressions.<sup>39</sup> Rāzī introduces this classification in the context of discussions about *ta'wīl* in *Mafātiḥ al-ghayb* and *Ta'sīs al-taqdīs*.<sup>40</sup> These discussions are thus crucial to Rāzī's overall methodology, and it will be appropriate to begin with a translation of the key elements of his discussions. Rāzī states:

Thus the result of this classification is that we hold that a verbal expression is either certain (*naṣṣ*), apparent (*ẓāhir*), nonapparent (*mu'awwal*), or general (*mushtarak* or *mujmal*). As for the certain and the apparent [verbal expressions], what these have in common is that they preponderate [toward a meaning]. However, a verbal expression that is certain preponderates and prevents [the possibility of] other [meanings], while an apparent [verbal expression] preponderates [towards a meaning] without preventing [the possibility of] other [meanings]. This shared extent is called clear (*muḥkam*). As for the general

39. The starting points for Rāzī's "science of interpretation" are Ghazālīan. On Ghazālī's science of interpretation, see Bello, *The Medieval Islamic Controversy Between Philosophy and Orthodoxy*, 52–82. On the role of the terms "mutashābih" and "muḥkam" in Islamic exegesis, see Fudge, *Quranic Hermeneutics. Al-Tabrisi and the craft of Qur'ān commentary*, 114–142; Kinberg, "Muḥkamāt and Mutashābihāt (Koran 3/7): Implications of a Pair of Terms in Medieval Exegesis," 143–172. For a panoramic treatment of Qur'ān 3:7 that brings out the divergent approaches to the terms "muḥkamāt" and "mutashābihāt" in *tafsīr* literature (as well as the textual relations between commentators and points of intersection in their exegeses), see McAuliffe, "Text and Textuality: Q. 3–7 as a Point of Intersection," 56–76.

40. Rāzī, *Mafātiḥ al-ghayb*, 7:180. See also the parallel passage in *Ta'sīs al-taqdīs*, 179–180.

(*mujmal*) and nonapparent (*mu'awwal*) [verbal expressions], what they share in common is that the verbal indicant does not preponderate [towards a meaning]. [In the case of the general verbal expression], although it does not preponderate [toward a meaning] the general meaning is not the less preponderant, (*marjūh*). [In the case of] the nonapparent, even though it does not preponderate towards a meaning it [sc. the nonapparent meaning] is less preponderant, but not in accordance with a single evidence. To the extent that the [verbal expressions] share this degree they are called ambiguous (*mutashābih*), because an absence of understanding arises in both divisions together.<sup>41</sup>

Rāzī presents a parallel classification of verbal expressions in *Ta'sīs al-taqdīs*:

Thus the result of this classification is that a verbal expression may be either certain (*naṣṣ*), apparent (*ẓāhir*), general (*mujmal*), or nonapparent (*mu'awwal*). As for the certain and apparent [verbal expressions], what they have in common is that they preponderate [towards a meaning]. However, a verbal expression that is certain preponderates towards a meaning and prevents conflict [with other meanings], while a verbal expression that is apparent preponderates without preventing conflict [with other meanings]. Thus what the certain and apparent verbal expressions have in common is the realization of preponderance [towards a meaning], and to the extent that they share this they are called “clear” (*muḥkam*). As for the general (*mujmal*) and the nonapparent (*mu'awwal*), what they share in common is that [their] verbal indicant does not preponderate. [However, the difference between the two is that] the general verbal expression does not preponderate with respect to one side or another, while the nonapparent (*mu'awwal*) [verbal expression] preponderates towards one common side and there is an absence of preponderance in relation to [that side], and this is called ambiguous (*mutashābih*). Now, know that the verbal expression, if it [preponderates] equally in favor of two meanings, then here the mind hesitates, as in the [Qur'ānic] example of menstruation in relation to the monthly period and purity. Indeed the difficulty is that the expression preponderates with respect to one of the two concepts and is outweighed in the other. In this case the preponderant [meaning] is false, and the less preponderant [meaning] (*marjūh*) is correct.<sup>42</sup>

41. Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 7:180.

42. Rāzī, *Ta'sīs al-taqdīs*, 180.



The complex classification system that Rāzī devises here can be more easily grasped through the following scheme. A verbal expression:

- I. A. either has only one meaning, in which case it is certain (*naṣṣ*), and here there is no conflict, since it is not susceptible to another meaning. This is an expression whose literal meaning is known with absolute certainty to be the intended meaning. Because there is no possibility that some other meaning is intended, there is no rule of preponderance in this case. Or B., is susceptible to more than one meaning. If B., then either
- II. A. its susceptibility to one of the two is greater, i.e., one [intended] meaning has preponderance over another. If A., then that expression is called apparent (*ẓāhir*) with respect to the preponderant meaning and nonapparent (*mu'awwal*) with respect to the nonpreponderant. Thus, in this case, the apparent is preponderant and the nonapparent is preponderated. If B. then
- III. It is equally susceptible to both, and these meanings have equal preponderance. In this case the verbal expression with respect to them both is common (*mushtarak*) and with respect to each specification is inclusive of more than one meaning (*mujmal*) intended by the speaker. The preponderant can be false and the nonpreponderant correct.

In this classification, verbal expressions signify meanings that they have been assigned primordially with the invention of language or that they have acquired by convention. These verbal expressions fall into one of four categories: certain (*naṣṣ*), apparent (*ẓāhir*), nonapparent (*mu'awwal*), and general (*mujmal*). Such expressions are subject to *susceptibility*—they can signify one meaning or more in some cases and therefore give rise to multiple possibilities of interpretation. They are also subject to *preponderance*—they can, in the case of those that signify multiple meanings, be subject to rules of interpretation governed by various kinds of evidence. For Rāzī, following the rules of preponderance is necessary for proper exegesis of the canonical sources.<sup>43</sup>

A certain (*naṣṣ*) verbal expression has one meaning only, and it preponderates toward its intended meaning. Such an expression is thus classified as “clear” (*muḥkam*). In this case the rule of preponderance acts as a guide for the

43. The classification of verbal expressions and the science of preponderance is also utilized by Āmidī (d. 631/1233). See Weiss, *The Search for God's Law: Islamic Jurisprudence in the Writings of Sayf al-Din al-Amidi*, 117–150.

exegete, and one follows this rule when interpreting such expressions in the Qur'ān and Sunna. Because the rule of preponderance is available as a guide in this instance, the question of *ta'wīl*—whether one can divert the apparent to the nonapparent—does not arise.

An apparent verbal expression (*ẓāhir*) is susceptible to *more than one* meaning, but it preponderates toward one intended meaning. This intended meaning is the apparent or literal one that was assigned to it primordially with the invention of language or that it has acquired by convention.<sup>44</sup> Here, again, in interpreting the verbal expression in the Qur'ān or Sunna, one is guided by the rule of preponderance, and interpreting the expression in accordance with the preponderant meaning demands that the expression be classified as “clear” (*muḥkam*).<sup>45</sup> In this case, there is no evidence that would require diverting the apparent to the nonapparent, so the question of *ta'wīl*—whether one should divert the apparent to the nonapparent—does not arise.

A nonapparent (or figurative) verbal expression (*mu'awwal*) is susceptible to more than one meaning and gives rise to multiple possibilities of interpretation. In this case, in contrast to the apparent verbal expression (*ẓāhir*), the verbal expression preponderates toward *more than one meaning*, not toward a *single* meaning.<sup>46</sup> Here, however, because the verbal expression does not preponderate toward the intended meaning, the mind is incapable of grasping the distinction between these possibilities of interpretation. Such an expression is accordingly classified as “ambiguous” (*mutashābih*), and it is here that the question of *ta'wīl* arises.<sup>47</sup>

A general expression (*mujmal*) is susceptible to two meanings and preponderates toward them both equally. Here the verbal expression is common (*mushtarak*) to both. An example of this is the homonym.

## 2.5 THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL CRITERION FOR THE APPLICATION OF *TA'WĪL*

It is within the above template and its rules that Rāzī introduces philosophical concepts to resolve the *ta'wīl*-issue. These concepts and principles are

44. Weiss, *The Search for God's Law*, 472.

45. Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 7:181; *Ta'sīs al-taqdīs*, 181.

46. Literally, “towards an aspect of what is common”; cf. Rāzī, *Ta'sīs al-taqdīs*, 180.

47. Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 7:181; *Ta'sīs al-taqdīs*, 181.

imports that Rāzī transfers across disciplinary boundaries—from philosophy into the religious sciences. By using philosophical resources to resolve the *ta'wīl*-issue, Rāzī continued a trend that earlier theologians, notably Juwaynī and Ghazālī, had already started. These two figures, among others, appropriated epistemological concepts from the Aristotelian-Avicennian philosophical tradition and naturalized them into the religious sciences.<sup>48</sup> But Rāzī's contributions surpassed those of earlier figures. Rāzī integrated philosophical concepts and principles into the religious sciences by making them cornerstones of his methodology, and he applied them systematically to the Qur'ān as he commented on it verse-by-verse, line-by-line, and word-by-word.

When Rāzī attempted to resolve the *ta'wīl*-issue using philosophical resources, he adopted starting points from Juwaynī and Ghazālī, his predecessors within the Ash'arite tradition. Juwaynī and Ghazālī aimed to find a criterion for *ta'wīl*—evidence that would be strong enough to show the impossibility of the apparent sense of anthropomorphic scriptural verses and reports. For both figures, it is *burhān* (“apodictic demonstration”) that serves this function. Had earlier theologians been familiar with this concept and had they known of its use, Juwaynī and Ghazālī argued, they would have applied *ta'wīl* to the anthropomorphic verses and reports and not adhered to their apparent sense or made real attributes out of them. Using this resource from Aristotelian-Avicennian philosophy, both Juwaynī and Ghazālī argued that the scriptural references that seem to indicate that God is in a direction or location are rational impossibilities. For example, the Qur'ānic expressions God's “being above,” and “He ascended the Throne,” are rational impossibilities because *burhān* points to the impossibility of their apparent senses. With this philosophical device, they argued, one had sufficiently strong evidence to apply *ta'wīl*—to divert the apparent sense of scripture to a nonapparent.

This critique is conspicuous in Ghazālī's *Qānūn al-ta'wīl* (“Principles of Exegesis”).<sup>49</sup> In this work Ghazālī lays out the methodology of five Muslim groups and characterizes each with respect to the weight they grant to reason

48. See Sabra, “The Appropriation and Subsequent Naturalization of Greek Science in Medieval Islam,” 223–243; Wisnovsky, “The nature and scope of Arabic philosophical commentary in post-classical (ca. 1100–1900 AD) Islamic intellectual history,” 149–191.

49. For a translation of this treatise, see Heer, “The Canons of Ta'wīl,” 111–122.

or intellect (*‘aql*) on the one hand and the Qur’ān and Sunna (*naql*) on the other. Of these five, the most successful is able to unify reasoning and the religious textual tradition by discerning that there is no conflict between the two. Only this group is properly philosophically equipped to apply *ta’wīl*. While group five goes unnamed and presumably refers to a new wave of Ash‘arite theologians who had acquainted themselves with philosophical methods and concepts, Ghazālī’s criticism of group four, I propose, is a critique of the classical Ash‘arite theologians. It denounces those who made real attributes out of “being above,” “He ascended the Throne,” and so forth due to their failure to realize the rational impossibility of their apparent sense. Ghazālī states:

The fourth group made scripture [the Qur’ān and Sunna] fundamental and dealt with it at length. They were familiar with a great number of scriptural passages, but they avoided human reasoning and did not plunge into it. The conflict between reasoning and scriptural passages was apparent to them only in some fringe areas of the rational sciences. However, because their involvement with reasoning was not extensive nor did they plunge into it, rational impossibilities were not obvious to them, for some impossibilities are perceived only after careful and extended investigation built on many successive premises.

One must add another point, and that is that they believed that they could consider anything to be possible as long as it was not known to be impossible. They did not realize that there are three categories [to be taken into account]: (1) a category whose impossibility is known by a proof, (2) a category whose possibility is known by proof, and (3) a category neither the possibility nor impossibility of which is known. It was their custom to judge this third category to be possible, since its impossibility was not apparent to them.<sup>50</sup>

What Ghazālī does here is to critique the methodology of his Ash‘arite predecessors and colleagues who assigned too much weight to the Qur’ān and Sunna and not enough weight to reason. Because his predecessors and colleagues were “short of [intellectual] insight,” they were unable to unify reason with scripture and consequently failed to realize that there is no conflict between the Qur’ān and Sunna—the canonical sources—and what reason establishes through rational evidence or philosophical demonstration. In short, they thought that

50. Ghazālī, *Qānūn al-ta’wīl*, 18; trans. Heer, “The Canons of Ta’wīl,” 50.

the conflict between these sources was real, because they failed to discern the rational impossibility of the *apparent* sense of certain Qurʾānic expressions and prophetic traditions. Later in this treatise Ghazālī mentions expressions such as God’s “being above” and “He ascended the Throne,” and it is likely that he has these anthropomorphic descriptions in mind. By incorrectly reasoning that their impossibility could not be demonstrated, this group mistakenly placed these descriptions in the category of possibility. Had this group been familiar with the philosophical concept of *burhān* (“philosophical demonstration”), Ghazālī would argue, they would have realized that the impossibility of such descriptions can be demonstrated through human reasoning, using “an extended investigation built on successive premises.”

As a result of this methodological error, this group did not apply *taʾwīl* and divert the anthropomorphic descriptions to figurative meanings. Ghazālī writes:

Since [this fourth group] did not plunge deeply into the rational sciences, they did not encounter many of these impossibilities. They were therefore spared the great effort of making most interpretations, for they were not aware of any need for interpretation. They resemble someone who does not know that God’s being in a direction is impossible and who can therefore dispense with the interpretation of “being above” and “[God’s] ascending [the Throne]” and all such words that indicate God’s being in a direction.<sup>51</sup>

For both Juwaynī and Ghazālī, the controversy concerning how Qurʾānic verses and prophetic reports should be interpreted turns on the epistemological question of what counts as certain knowledge.<sup>52</sup> Philosophical demonstration (*burhān*), they both argued, conveys strong enough evidence to serve as a criterion for *taʾwīl*. The failure to apply *taʾwīl* to the anthropomorphic descriptions is due to a certain intellectual incompetence, namely an incapacity to produce a philosophical demonstration that precludes the apparent sense as a plausible interpretation.

The turn toward Muʿtazilite *taʾwīl* in Ashʿarism thus started before Rāzī, with Juwaynī and Ghazālī. Upon producing apodictic demonstrations that indicate the falsity of the apparent sense of scripture, Juwaynī and Ghazālī

51. Ghazālī, *Qānūn al-taʾwīl*, 19; trans. Heer, “The Canons of Taʾwīl,” 51.

52. The point is made most recently by Griffel (2009), who cites several references to Marmura’s insights into this; Griffel, *Al-Ghazali’s Philosophical Theology*, 112.

apply *ta'wīl* to the anthropomorphic Qur'ānic verses and prophetic reports. Both critique their Ash'arite colleagues for adhering to the apparent sense of anthropomorphic attributes, and for making real attributes out of "ascending the Throne," "coming," "descending," and "having a side."<sup>53</sup> Juwaynī applies *ta'wīl* by construing "hands" as "power," [God's] "eyes" as "vision," and [God's] "face" as "existence" on the basis of "rational proof."<sup>54</sup> Ghazālī postulates that philosophical demonstration shows the impossibility of God's "being above" (in a spatial sense); he applies *ta'wīl* to this expression by interpreting it figuratively along Mu'tazilite lines to mean "superior in rank."<sup>55</sup>



Rāzī inherits the idea of a philosophical criterion for *ta'wīl* from Juwaynī and Ghazālī. Although his developments build on their contributions, he introduces a new epistemic framework to resolve the *ta'wīl*-issue. This alternative epistemic framework, which comprises two methods of proof—rational and textual—is a salient feature of Rāzī's methodology. Rāzī assumes these methods of proofs in his works of theology, and he uses them both extensively in his Qur'ān commentary. I demonstrate this by showing that Rāzī's epistemic framework and its rules regarding *ta'wīl* strongly resemble radical Mu'tazilite ideas that were articulated earlier in the tradition and that were branded as heretical in most intellectual circles. Rāzī's distinctive conception of *ta'wīl*, I shall argue, assigns the canonical sources—the Qur'ān and Sunna—an exceptionally low epistemic value.

Let me begin with some remarks about Rāzī's epistemic system, including its technical terminology and concepts, since it is within this system that Rāzī introduces his rule that governs Qur'ānic interpretation. The two cornerstones of Rāzī's epistemic system are rational and verbal proofs. The former is based on non-religious evidence and the latter on the religious evidence of the Qur'ān and Sunna.<sup>56</sup> These are essentially two sources of

53. Juwaynī, *Kitāb al-Irshād*, 68.

54. See Juwaynī, *Irshād*, 68: "Some of our masters maintained that the two hands, the two eyes and the face are proper Attributes of the Lord God and that this is proven by tradition rather than rational proof. But the correct view, in our opinion, is that the hands should be construed as power, the eyes as vision and the face as existence."

55. Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology*, 112–113.

56. Ibn Taymiyya, *Against the Greek Logicians* (trans. Hallaq), 150.

guidance that may be used in theological proofs, and each argues from a different kind of evidence.<sup>57</sup>

A verbal proof (*dalīl naqlī*) uses evidence based on statements that are expressed in the Qurʾān and Sunna—the religious textual tradition (*naql*). The evidence that a verbal proof employs is thus taken from what has been transmitted by the Prophet and is embodied in the religious textual tradition.<sup>58</sup> In contrast, a rational proof (*dalīl ʿaqlī*) is based on premises known intuitively or necessarily to be true through reason or sense perception.<sup>59</sup> Most philosophers and theologians in the Islamic tradition considered such premises to have high epistemic value; accordingly, they deemed them suitable for use as premises in a philosophical demonstration.<sup>60</sup> Because these premises were considered the building blocks for philosophical arguments, many theological and philosophical works provide lists of them. The following list appears in Avicenna's *Ishārāt*: (1) Primary propositions (*al-awwaliyyāt*); the statement that the whole is greater than any of its parts; (2) Propositions containing their own syllogisms (*qaḍāya qiyāsātuhā maʿāha*), such as the statement that four is an even number; (3) Sensibly perceived propositions (*al-mahsūsāt*); the statement that this fire is hot; (4) Empirical propositions (*al-mujarrabāt*) or facts known through experimentation, such as the statement that scammony is a laxative; (5) Intuitive propositions (*al-ḥadsīyāt*) or acute guesses, as for example, the statement that the light of the moon is derived from that of the sun; (6) Propositions based on unanimous reports or traditions (*al-tawāturīyāt*); this included historical or geographical facts reported by a sufficient number of witnesses such that it would be impossible to suppose that they were all lying.<sup>61</sup>

Like his predecessors Juwaynī and Ghazālī, Rāzī sees the exegetical problem of *taʾwīl* through the lens of epistemology. And like his predecessors, he proposes that the criterion for *taʾwīl* must rank as strong evidence—it must

57. Rāzī, *Muḥaṣṣal*, 66–67.

58. For a discussion of verbal evidence, see van Ess, *Die Erkenntnislehre*, 406–407. The two (Qurʾān and prophetic traditions) are grouped together on the grounds that both are expressed by the Prophet.

59. Heer, “Rational and Traditional Proofs in Islamic Theology,” [Online] Available at <http://hdl.handle.net/1773/4873>.

60. Black, *Logic and Aristotle's "Rhetoric" and "Poetics" in Medieval Arabic Philosophy*, 97.

61. See Avicenna, *Remarks and Admonitions* (trans. Inati), 118–121. On the purpose of this epistemic scheme, and its role and place in Avicenna's works, see Black, *Logic and Aristotle's*

be strong enough to show the impossibility of the apparent sense. Only with such evidence in hand is it permissible for an exegete to divert the verbal expression's preponderant sense to a nonpreponderant sense. In Rāzī's epistemic system, the only two candidates that would qualify for this role are rational (*dalil 'aqli*) and verbal evidence (*dalil lafẓī*). Rāzī states:

It is necessary to establish a rule that governs this issue: We hold that a verbal expression, if it is susceptible to two meanings, and it preponderates more towards one than another—if one interprets it in accordance with the preponderant [meaning]—then that [verbal expression is classified as] clear (*muḥkam*). Now, if one interprets it in accordance with the nonpreponderant [meaning], then that is ambiguous (*mutashābih*). We claim that diverting the verbal expression from the preponderant [meaning] to the nonpreponderant [meaning] may take place only through decisive evidence. That decisive evidence may be either verbal or rational.<sup>62</sup>

He delineates the same rule in his *Ta'sīs al-taqdīs* in a passage that parallels the above:

It is necessary to [advance] a general rule that governs this issue. We hold that if the verbal expression of a verse or report is apparent (*ẓāhir*) [in its meaning], in our opinion it is only permissible to depart from that apparent [meaning] with decisive evidence, otherwise [God's] speech would cease to convey meaning and the Qur'ān would no longer be a proof. That decisive evidence may be either verbal or rational.<sup>63</sup>

Here Rāzī describes a general rule that governs the application of *ta'wīl*. He proposes that one may apply *ta'wīl* and “depart from the apparent meaning” if one produces evidence strong enough to show the falsity of the preponderant meaning. In the scheme that he proposes, decisive evidence fulfills this role. Such evidence may be rational evidence or verbal evidence, and these

“Rhetoric” and “Poetics,” 98ff. Black notes that Avicenna's categories are faculty-oriented and that this is vaguely reminiscent of the discussions of Philoponus and his successors, in which syllogistic premises were classified according to their originating faculties.

62. Rāzī, *Mafātiḥ al-ghayb*, 7:181.

63. Rāzī, *Ta'sīs al-taqdīs*, 181.



function as deciding factors in the case of diversion. The “general rule” that governs the interpretation of the Qur’ān and Sunna is thus grounded in the issue of what counts as strong evidence.



While Rāzī’s double-pronged epistemic framework that I have described represented a novel approach to resolving the *ta’wīl*-issue, one also trace further departures from classical Ash‘arism in his thought. Such departures also betray an influence of radical Mu‘tazilism on Rāzī’s Sunnī thought. Chief among these is the idea that the Qur’ān and Sunna in Rāzī’s thought have an exceptionally low epistemic value. Indeed, a close examination of Rāzī’s explanations of verbal evidence indicates that Rāzī, like the Mu‘tazila generally, devalued the religious textual tradition, that is, the transmitted knowledge that was embodied in the Qur’ān and Sunna.

Rāzī’s devaluation of the epistemic value of the Qur’ān and Sunna is evinced in his critique of *tawātur* (“recurrent”) prophetic reports—reports that are considered the mainstay of “verbal evidence.” *Tawātur*, or recurrent reports, are reports that have been transmitted through multiple chains of transmission that are textually identical. These chains of transmission were considered sufficiently numerous to preclude any possibility or collaboration of a forgery.<sup>64</sup> The *tawātur* transmitters, most theologians argued, cannot all have a single reason to lie, and it is inconceivable that they should conspire to tell the same lie.<sup>65</sup> The impossibility of a forgery functioned as a criterion for the reliability of such reports for Ghazālī and others. Moreover, its content was guaranteed by this criterion. Such reports, theologians held, allowed us to obtain knowledge of past events.<sup>66</sup> Thus, knowledge that Mecca exists and knowledge that Muḥammad is a prophet, for example, all fall under this category according to Muslim theologians.

The Islamic intellectual tradition—theologians, philosophers, and jurists—assigned recurrent reports a high epistemic value. They counted them among premises that produced necessary or certain knowledge.<sup>67</sup> Accordingly, they

64. Hallaq, “The Authenticity of Prophetic Hadīth: A Pseudo-Problem,” 78; “On Inductive Corroboration, Probability and Certainty in Sunnī Legal Thought,” 9–24.

65. Hallaq, “Inductive Corroboration,” (citing Rāzī and Farrā’), 16.

66. Weiss, “Knowledge of the Past: The Theory of *Tawātur* According to Ghazālī,” 81–105.

67. On necessary knowledge, see Abrahamov, “Necessary Knowledge in Islamic Theology,” 20–32; Rosenthal, *Knowledge Triumphant: The Concept of Knowledge in Medieval Islam*, passim.

held that such reports could be used as the bases for demonstrative arguments, which proceeded from premises that were necessarily true and did not admit of doubt.<sup>68</sup> Ghazālī, for example, argued that what is transmitted through *tawātur* yielded premises that could be used in demonstrative proofs. For him, as well as for many others, it was the reliability of the transmissions of such reports that warranted their inclusion in demonstrative proofs. In short, their content was guaranteed by transmission.

The Muʿtazila argued against the prevailing views on this issue, and Rāzī's critique of the epistemic value of the religious textual tradition (*naql*) bears the imprint of Muʿtazilite speculation. Rāzī's critique subjects recurrent prophetic reports to a stringent measure of doubt.<sup>69</sup> Like Muʿtazilite critiques that were articulated earlier, Rāzī's critique focuses on transmission.<sup>70</sup> What he does is judge the epistemic value of such reports by producing a yardstick that measures the reliability of their transmission process. The gist of the argument is that because the transmission process contains so many contingencies, the statements that are transmitted through such a process reach only a degree of probability, not certainty. In *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* Rāzī states:

- (a) Verbal evidence is contingent upon the transmission of words, the transmission of aspects of grammar and inflection, the absence of equivocation, the absence of metaphor, the absence of specification, the absence of ellipses, and the absence of the textual and rationalist objection. And all of these things are contingent, so it is established that no form of verbal evidence is decisive.<sup>71</sup>

In *Taʾsīs al-taqdīs* Rāzī states:

- (b) As for the first [verbal evidence], this is false, because verbal evidences do not convey certain [knowledge], because they are contingent upon the transmission

68. Weiss, "Knowledge of the Past," 99.

69. The only thinker who expresses such a degree of doubt about prophetic reports is the Muʿtazilite Abū Ishāq al-Nazzām, whose views were considered radical even by Muʿtazilite standards.

70. On the attitude of the Muʿtazila toward *ḥadīth*, see van Ess, "L'autorité de la tradition prophétique dans la théologie muʿtazilite," 211ff. See also now El-Omari, "Accommodation and Resistance: Classical Muʿtazilites on Ḥadīth," 231–256. (This article came to my attention late, and I was unable to incorporate it into this chapter.)

71. Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 7:181; van Ess, *Die Erkenntnislehre*, 408–417.

of words, the transmission of aspects of grammar and inflection, the absence of equivocation and metaphor, and specification, and the absence of ellipses, and the absence of the textual and rationalist objection. All of these are *probable* premises, and what is contingent upon hypothetical is more worthy of being probable. Thus it is established that no form of verbal evidences can possibly convey certainty.<sup>72</sup>

Here Rāzī lists a number of conditions that must be fulfilled if a verbal report is to convey certain knowledge. In the course of doing so, however, he implies that the transmissions of such reports or statements rely on conditions that are contingent and cannot possibly function as a medium for certain knowledge. For example, meanings change through disputes about inflection—in the case of a metaphor, the intended meaning could be other than what we know or conceive. Moreover, in the case of a metaphorical meaning, no one is better than the others. Finally, the transmitters themselves committed many errors in the process of transmission—the human element made the process wholly contingent. Now, because components of the transmission process are unreliable, the content of what is transmitted by them can only reach probable knowledge, not certain knowledge. But because these are all contingencies and rely on an unreliable process subject to human error, the content of what is transmitted by them can only reach the level of probable knowledge. What Rāzī does, in effect, is to set the bar for necessary or certain knowledge so high that recurrent reports—even the strongest form of traditions transmitted by the Prophet—do not make the cut for certain knowledge and have low epistemic value.

This skepticism about ḥadīth literature as a source of religious knowledge greatly impacted Rāzī's methodology in *tafsīr*. Because he assigns even the strongest of *ḥadīth* reports a low epistemic value, Rāzī openly dismisses as mythical various canonical prophetic reports that had long been recognized as authoritative within the Islamic tradition. Rāzī's commentary on Qurʾān 27: 84, a verse that alludes to an apocalyptic beast, provides a good example of this.<sup>73</sup> The Qurʾānic verse reads as follows: "When the Word falls on them, We shall bring forth for them out of the earth a beast that shall speak unto them: 'Mankind

72. Rāzī, *Taʾsīs al-taqdīs*, 182. Rāzī argues along similar lines in *Maʾālim uṣūl al-dīn*, 24.

73. Rāzī, *Maʾfātīḥ al-ghayb*, 24:217–218; Goldziher, "Aus der Theologie," 237.

had no faith in Our signs.’”<sup>74</sup> During Rāzī’s time a wealth of prophetic reports had been tied to this verse. These reports concerned the creation of this beast, its physical characteristics, the language it spoke, where it would arise, and so on. Moreover, all of this material had been attributed to the Prophet and long been recognized as authoritative.

Rāzī openly rejects this mass of material on the grounds that its transmission is doubtful. If one could establish that this actually stemmed from the Prophet, so Rāzī’s argument goes, then it could be accepted. But it cannot. There are just too many conditions—the whole catalogue that he lists above—that would have to be fulfilled in order for the content to be reliable.

Let me conclude by mentioning that Rāzī’s yardstick that measures the reliability of verbal evidence and prophetic reports points to several salient features of his thought that smack of Muʿtazilism. While one of these features is the priority of reason, another concerns the specific function of reason. Certainly one of the functions of reason in Rāzī’s thought is to cast doubt on authority—not only of teachers but also the canonical sources. Judging by his critical attitude toward even the strongest ḥadīths, it would seem that Rāzī’s casting of doubt was unqualified and unrestricted. Only a thinker favorably disposed to the most radical of Muʿtazilite ideas could have developed such a position.<sup>75</sup>

74. Trans. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted*.

75. On the radical nature of Rāzī’s epistemic framework, see van Ess, *Die Erkenntnislehre*, 309 and 412. Indeed, before Rāzī, the only thinker to have formulated such radical views on ḥadīth reports was Abū Ishāq al-Nazzām, the maverick Muʿtazilite. See Baghdādī, *Kitāb al-Farq bayn al-firaq*, 143; here it is attributed to Nazzām that recurrent reports might be false. See also van Ess, “Ein Unbekanntes Fragment des Nazzām,” 170–201.

### CHAPTER THREE

## RECONCILING REASON (ʿAQL) AND TRANSMITTED KNOWLEDGE (NAQL)



In this chapter I analyze the ways that Rāzī reconciles two authoritative sources of knowledge, namely reason (ʿaql) and transmitted knowledge, i.e., the scriptural canon (naql). I argue that one of the aims of his intellectual program is to demonstrate that reason (and specifically the conclusions that are reached through the activity of human reasoning) is compatible with the ideas expressed by the Qurʾān and prophetic traditions. To describe how Rāzī achieves this goal, I dissect the rationalistic principles that are central to his methodology and that inform his theory of Qurʾānic hermeneutics, especially his theory of *taʾwīl*. Additionally, I explore the difficulties that Rāzī encounters in his efforts to set his methodology of Qurʾānic interpretation on rationalistic foundations, and I explain the ways that he resolves such difficulties.

Rāzī's justification for *taʾwīl* is essential to his overall project in the field of Qurʾān commentary. As Lagarde notes in his recent study of Rāzī's Qurʾān commentary, one of Rāzī's objectives in *Maḥāṭib al-ghayb* is to discover the secrets (*asrār*) of various branches of knowledge—metaphysics, cosmology, natural science, anthropology, and psychology—that God deposited in the Qurʾān. In Rāzī's view, such knowledge that is embedded in the Qurʾān

can be discovered only through the proper application of *ta'wīl*—that is, by diverting the Qur'ān's apparent sense to a figurative, allegorical, or symbolic sense. In order to defend this exegetical practice, Rāzī sets his theory of *ta'wīl* on solid rationalistic foundations. He recognized that his intellectual project in Qur'ān commentary would lack a solid foundation if it were not supported by a powerful and decisive argument, by which he means evidence that is entirely rationalistic and not based on the canonical sources (the Qur'ān and prophetic traditions).

I begin by explaining several critical technical terms in Rāzī's vocabulary and by outlining an epistemological distinction that is central to his methodology. Rāzī distinguishes between two sources of authority: human reason (*'aql*) and transmitted knowledge (*naql*). He uses the term *'aql* to refer to a source of knowledge as well as a method of attaining knowledge. It includes the knowledge that the human intellect derives from premises that are established through rational means (i.e., discursive reasoning) or experience. The method by which such knowledge is produced, because it relies on premises that are established by the intellect (or experience), is called a rational proof, (*dalīl 'aqlī*), and such a proof can convey either decisive or probable knowledge.<sup>1</sup>

Rāzī uses the expression “transmitted knowledge” (*naql*) to refer to the assertions that are contained in the Qur'ān and prophetic traditions, which together constitute the scriptural canon. He places all such statements within the category of transmitted knowledge, since they all can be traced to the prophet.<sup>2</sup> Just as one can use evidence established by the intellect to construct a rational proof, one can use evidence that is established by the Qur'ān or prophetic traditions to construct a scriptural proof (*dalīl naqlī*). Like a rational proof, a scriptural proof can convey either decisive or probable knowledge.<sup>3</sup>

Although one might be inclined to characterize the Qur'ān as *revealed* knowledge, Rāzī divorces this entire body of knowledge from its supernatural origin. As van Ess argues in his foundational work on epistemology in the post-classical period, it is Rāzī's view that revelation comprises statements of belief that must be accepted because they can be traced back to the prophet or

1. Rāzī, *Muḥaṣṣal*, 66–67.

2. Van Ess, *Die Erkenntnislehre*, 407.

3. The distinction between these methods of proof is found earlier in Ash'arism. See, for example, Juwaynī, *Irshād*, 9.

reliable transmitters of prophetic traditions. Rāzī effectively gives revelation the status of credible reports by placing Qurʾānic statements along with prophetic traditions in a single category, which he calls “transmitted knowledge” (*naql*). In such a system, the content of revelation is accepted as true because it can be traced to the credible source of the prophet—not because it has been handed down from a divine authority and supernatural origin.<sup>4</sup>

### 3.1 RĀZĪ’S RATIONALIST OBJECTION TO SCRIPTURE (*AL-MUʿĀRIḌ AL-ʿAQLĪ*)

In the following section I explore the salient features and difficulties of Rāzī’s *taʾwīl* methodology. Rāzī claims (as we saw in his exegesis of the Throne verse) that the implications of the human intellect’s discursive reasoning (*ʿaql*) are fundamentally compatible with the ideas that are expressed by the canonical sources—the Qurʾān and prophetic traditions. Furthermore, he proposes that the conclusions reached through the intellect’s discursive reasoning and the ideas expressed by the canonical sources confirm and reinforce each other.

The claims that reason and transmitted knowledge are congruous and that they substantiate each other were advanced by Rāzī’s predecessors in the Ashʿarite tradition. Before Rāzī, Ghazālī established a basic framework that made it possible for Sunnī theologians to reconcile reason and the canonical sources. In the introduction to his *Iqtīṣād*, Ghazālī asserts that the “partisans of the Sunna” are “acquainted with the method of uniting the implications of divine legislation and the necessities of the intellect.” Moreover, he maintains that the partisans of the Sunna have “verified that there is no opposition between textual matters [sc. transmitted knowledge] and what is imparted by theoretical reasoning” [sc. reason].<sup>5</sup>

4. This point is emphasized by Van Ess in van Ess *Die Erkenntnislehre*, 407: “Die Offenbarung ist da nur ein Einzelfall unter all den Dingen, die aufgrund glaubwürdiger Aussage, vom Propheten einmal, ein andermal von einem glaubwürdigen ‘Berichterstatter,’ übernommen werden. Die Offenbarung wird, so ergibt sich, nicht von ihrem übernatürlichen Ursprung her gesehen, auch nicht von ihrem Inhalt her, sondern von der Art ihrer Weitergabe: als Berichterstattung. So auch glaubt man an sie: nicht weil sie von Gott käme, sondern weil man den Propheten für glaubwürdig halten muß.”

5. Ghazālī, *Iqtīṣād*, 1. See also the discussion in Frank, “Al-Ghazālī on Taqlīd,” 210.

Rāzī adopts the fundamental principles that Ghazālī attributes to the partisans of the Sunna, and he uses them as starting points for his methodology. But in contrast to Ghazālī, Rāzī recognizes the difficulties that such a methodology of unification implies, and he attempts to resolve such difficulties. Rāzī acknowledges that there are occasions when reason and transmitted knowledge can come into conflict. It is his view that when the intellect assembles decisive rational evidence, such evidence can expose the falsity of the plain sense of a scriptural assertion. It is such cases of rational impossibilities that Rāzī has in mind when he contends that reason and transmitted knowledge can impart ideas that counter the truth of one another.

One of Rāzī's chief objectives is to close the conceptual gap between reason and transmitted knowledge by reconciling these apparently conflicting sources of authority. The driving questions of his methodology are the following: How can the decisive evidence assembled by the intellect be reconciled with the scriptural evidence that opposes it? How ought one to interpret Qur'ānic verses and prophetic traditions whose apparent sense opposes the conclusions reached by the human intellect?<sup>6</sup>

In the course of this chapter, we shall see that Rāzī resolves these methodological difficulties by devising two guiding principles that govern such cases of conflict.<sup>7</sup> As Heer notes in his foundational article on this issue, these principles were identified and elaborated upon by Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1327), who was both the leading representative of Islamic traditionalism and Rāzī's greatest opponent. Although Rāzī mentions these prescriptions only sporadically in his works, they are implicit in his exegeses of many Qur'ānic verses and prophetic traditions. Rāzī intends these two interrelated principles to provide a wholly rational justification for his interpretive project in *tafsīr*.

The first major principle that supplies the foundation of Rāzī's methodology is the "rationalist objection to scripture" (*al-mu'ārid al-'aqli*). Rāzī holds that the intellect, through discursive reasoning, has the power to produce decisive rational evidence; and, he holds that in cases of conflict between such evidence and the plain sense of scripture, the evidence assembled by the intellect can show the falsity of the plain sense of scripture and overturn it. The

6. Rāzī, *Ta'sīs al-taqdīs*, 172–173.

7. Heer identifies these principles in "The Priority of Reason in the Interpretation of Scripture: Ibn Taymiyyah and the Mutakallimūn," 181–195.



second major principle, which is the priority of reason over scripture, also testifies to the heavy weight that Rāzī gives to reason over transmitted knowledge. Rāzī holds that when a conflict arises between reason and transmitted knowledge, the decisive evidence that the intellect assembles must be given priority over the plain sense of scripture; and that consequently, it is necessary to interpret scripture figuratively in such a way that it conforms to the conclusions reached by the rational faculty. These two principles form the basis of Rāzī's argument for *ta'wīl* by providing a wholly rational justification for it, and they govern the way that Rāzī interprets the scriptural canon (*naql*).

The innovative principles that Rāzī devised within the Sunnī tradition preserve a basic line of reasoning about scriptural interpretation that was developed by the Mu'tazila. In his study, *Une lecture mu'tazilite du coran*, Gimaret notes that Abū 'Alī al-Jubbā'ī (d. 303/915), Abū l-Qāsim al-Balkhī al-Ka'bi (d. 319/931), and Abū Muslim al-Iṣfahānī (d. 322/934), pioneered a methodology for Mu'tazilism. They reconciled Qur'ānic ideas with the faculty of human reason by availing themselves of a variety of interpretive methods.<sup>8</sup>

Gimaret postulates that Jubbā'ī was motivated by a desire to show that Qur'ānic ideas conform to the system of theology and cosmology that he had constructed. In his work that reconstructs Jubbā'ī's *tafsīr* from later sources, Gimaret outlines some of Jubbā'ī's exegetical principles and techniques. He notes that Jubbā'ī posited a figurative sense for Qur'ānic verses (especially anthropomorphic ones) that imply an improbability; that he proposed that some Qur'ānic verses have an "implied sense" (*sous-entendu*) that is unstated; and that he employed rhetorical devices, including metonymy and hysteron proteron (*taqdīm wa ta'khīr*, "the latter in front of the former"), in order to maintain Mu'tazilite positions and counter opposing positions.<sup>9</sup> Later generations of Mu'tazilites, including 'Abd al-Jabbār (d. 415/1025) and Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144), inherited Jubbā'ī's principles.

8. Gimaret, *Une lecture mu'tazilite du Coran. Le Tafsīr d'Abū 'Alī al-Djubbā'ī*, 11–16. On Mu'tazilite principles of exegesis, see Fudge, *Qur'ānic Hermeneutics. Al-Tabrisi and the craft of Qur'ān commentary*, 114–142; Goldziher, *Die Richtungen*, 130–135. On the reception of Mu'tazilite *tafsīr* in later sources, see Mourad, "The Survival of the Mu'tazila Tradition of Qur'ānic Exegesis in Shī'ī and Sunnī *tafāsīr*," 83–108.

9. Gimaret also notes that these are not hard and fast rules for Jubbā'ī, and he cites examples in which Jubbā'ī accepts the plain sense of certain Qur'ānic verses; see Gimaret, *Une lecture mu'tazilite du Coran*, 63–65.

In one respect, Rāzī's methodology continues the strongly rationalizing tendencies of the Mu'tazila. His theory of *ta'wīl* gives heavy weight to the faculty of reason, and it aims to reconcile reason's implications with scriptural ideas. His *ta'wīl* methodology, however, shifts the framework of the discussion about the compatibility of reason and scripture. His hermeneutical project aims to bring about a complete reconciliation of reason and the entire body of transmitted knowledge—the sum total of assertions that are contained in the Qur'ān and prophetic traditions/Sunna; and it is this objective that gives Rāzī's project a distinctively Sunnī agenda.

In addition to building a new framework of *ta'wīl* methodology, Rāzī also comes up with an original resolution to the problem of conflict between reason (*'aql*) and transmitted knowledge (*naql*). In contrast to his predecessors among the Mu'tazila and Ash'ariyya, Rāzī insists that the interpretive practice of *ta'wīl*, which entails diverting the plain sense of the Qur'ān (or a prophetic tradition) to a figurative or allegorical sense, is a *logical necessity*. Furthermore, he claims to provide an entirely rationalistic justification for *ta'wīl*. It is plain from his method of reasoning that Rāzī intends to demonstrate, using decisive rational evidence, that *ta'wīl* is the *only* valid option for cases when rational evidence (*dalīl 'aqlī*) opposes scripture's apparent sense.

Rāzī presents his justification for *ta'wīl* in his principal scriptural commentary, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, and in his works of theology, notably *Tā'sīs al-taqdīs* and *al-Masā'il al-Khamsūn*.<sup>10</sup> Several components of his argument for *ta'wīl* are reiterated and expanded by Ibn Taymiyya, who, writing from the perspective of Islamic traditionalism, sought to undermine Rāzī's rationalistic program in his *Dar' ta'āruḍ al-'aql wa-l-naql*. Since Rāzī presents slightly different versions and components of his justification for *ta'wīl* in the aforementioned texts, I will present all three of them before examining the ways that Ibn Taymiyya challenged Rāzī's *ta'wīl* methodology. In a discussion in which he rejects the plain sense of the Qur'ānic verse "And the Merciful ascended the Throne" (Qur'ān 2, 4), Rāzī states:

- (a) This is decisive evidence (*dalāla qāṭi'a*) that it is necessary to apply *ta'wīl* in cases when one can establish, on the basis of rational evidence (*al-dalāla*

10. Rāzī, *Tā'sīs al-taqdīs*, 172–173; idem, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 22:6–7; idem, *Al-Masā'il al-Khamsūn fī Uṣūl al-Dīn*, 39–40; Ibn Taymiyya, *Dar' ta'āruḍ al-'aql wa-l-naql*, 1:4.

*al-ʿaqliyya*), that God's sitting (*al-istiqrār*) on the Throne is impossible and that the plain sense of the expression, God's setting Himself upright (*al-istiwāʾ*) indicates the meaning of sitting. In this case, either: [1] one accepts the truth of both rational and scriptural evidence; or [2] one renounces them both; or [3] one gives priority to scripture over reason; or [4] one gives priority to reason over scripture. The first is impossible, since then it would follow that a unitary thing [sc. God] would transcend spatial location yet also be realized in a spatial location, which is impossible. The second is also false because then the two contradictories would be eliminated, and this is impossible. The third is impossible, because reason is the source of scripture.<sup>11</sup>

Rāzī presents a parallel argument in *Taʾsis al-taqdīs*:

(b) Know that if rational decisive evidence establishes something to be true, but then we find scriptural evidence whose apparent sense imparts the contrary of that, then there can be only one of four alternatives. Either [1] one affirms the implications of reason and scripture, but this is impossible because it requires the affirmation of two contradictory propositions, or [2] one rejects both as false, but this is also impossible because it requires the denial of two contradictory propositions, or [3] one affirms scriptural evidence and denies the rational evidence.<sup>12</sup>

The justification for *taʾwīl* that Rāzī presents in *al-Masāʾil al-khamsūn* is significant because it adds a crucial element, namely the argument for impugnement, which I analyze below:

(c) If rational evidence and scripture are in conflict, then it is not permissible to affirm the truth of both [propositions], because the affirmation of negation and affirmation would then follow, and that is impossible; to affirm the falsity of both is also impossible; and to declare false the rational evidence and affirm the truth of the textual evidence is also impossible. [This is] because the veracity of scripture depends on the veracity of rational demonstration.<sup>13</sup>

11. Rāzī, *Mafātiḥ al-ghayb*, 22:6–7.

12. Rāzī, *Taʾsis al-taqdīs*, 172–173; I have mainly followed Heer's translation in *The Priority of Reason*, 184–185. See also Ibn Taymiyya, *Darʾ taʾāruḍ al-ʿaql wa-l-naql*, 1:4.

13. Rāzī, *Al-Masāʾil al-Khamsūn fī Uṣūl al-Dīn*, 39–40.

Ibn Taymiyya reiterates this argument in his *Dar'*. He writes: (d) If there is a conflict between scriptural and rational evidence, or scripture and reason, or tradition and reason, or traditional texts and rational certainties, or what is expressed in similar terms, then either [1] both may be accepted as true, but that is impossible because it violates the principle of contradiction, or [2] both may be rejected as false, [and that is also impossible because it violates the principle of excluded middle], or [3] scripture may be given priority [over reason]. That, however, is also impossible because reason is the source of scripture, and if we give priority to scripture over reason, we should thereby impugn reason, which is the source of scripture. Furthermore, to impugn the source of a thing is also to impugn the thing itself. Therefore, to give priority to scripture is not only to impugn reason but to impugn scripture as well. It is, therefore, necessary [4] to give priority to reason and either to interpret scripture allegorically, or to entrust its meaning to God. If the conflict involves opposite or contrary propositions [rather than contradictory propositions], then, although both cannot be accepted as true, both may be rejected as false.<sup>14</sup>

In the above selections Rāzī justifies the exegetical practice of *ta'wīl* by arguing that it is a logical necessity. His argument hinges on a central epistemic distinction between two sources of knowledge—*ʿaql* and *naql*. Rāzī holds that, within his dichotomous epistemic system, reason and transmitted knowledge can come into conflict. A conflict between these two sources of knowledge arises when a person establishes, using the faculty of reason, decisive evidence that opposes the plain sense of a scriptural proposition. When scripture (either a Qurʾānic verse or a prophetic tradition) conveys evidence that God is in a direction or place, and the faculty of reason provides evidence that God is transcendent above direction and place, which source ought to be given priority?

To find a solution to this exegetical problem, Rāzī develops a strategy that resolves such instances of conflict. The logical method that he uses in selections (a) through (d) imply that he accomplishes this task by applying his customary procedure of investigation and successive elimination (*taqṣīm wa-sabr*).<sup>15</sup> In these excerpts he outlines four exclusive alternatives. Each alternative is a possible solution to a case in which the decisive evidence (*dalāla*

14. Ibn Taymiyya, *Dar' ta'āruḍ al-ʿaql wa-l-naql*, 1:4.

15. On this method, see van Ess, "The Logical Structure of Islamic Theology," *passim*.

*qāṭi'a*) that is assembled by the faculty of reason (*ʿaql*) opposes the decisive evidence that is imparted by scripture (*naql*). Since these solutions are distinct alternatives, Rāzī implicitly excludes the possibility that more than one can be true. He postulates four alternates for cases in which the faculty of reason assembles decisive evidence that opposes scripture's plain sense; he then deduces that three of these alternatives are impossibilities, and he concludes that the remaining alternate is true.

In the first case, one asserts that the decisive evidence implied by both reason and scripture are true with respect to a particular issue, although the two assertions are contradictory. To do this requires affirming the truth of two contradictory propositions, which is impossible. For example, one cannot affirm the rational evidence that God is transcendent above location and direction and affirm the scriptural evidence that God is spatially located on the Throne.

In the second case, one denies the truth of the decisive evidence implied by both reason and scripture. To do this entails affirming the truth of two contradictory propositions, which is a logical impossibility. Because these propositions are contradictories, one of them must be true; it is impossible to deny both that God is transcendent above location and direction and that He is on the Throne. (One of these must be true, given that they are contradictories.) To do this would call into question the logical law that one of these sources of knowledge must be correct.

In the third case, one assents to scripture's apparent sense and denies the decisive rational evidence established by the intellect. To show that this is also impossible, Rāzī relies on the principle that scripture's veracity—the propositions contained in the Qur'ān and prophetic traditions—is established through rational means. In his view, we only know the truthfulness of scripture through reason, which proves its credibility by providing evidence of its correctness.<sup>16</sup> So, if one were to affirm scripture's apparent sense and to deny the contrary evidence that intellect establishes, one would in fact be invalidating reason as a valid source of evidence, the source that proved scripture's veracity. But if reason is invalidated as a source of evidence, then scripture, whose truthfulness is established through rational means, is also invalidated. Thus, to give priority to scripture over reason results in a logical impossibility: It demands that one affirm scripture's apparent sense, but it

16. Ibn Taymiyya, *Dar' ta'arud al-'aql wa-l-naql*, 1:89.

also demands that one deny the evidence that scripture imparts by rejecting the source that proved its credibility, namely reason. In this case, what reason proved to be true in the first place is also false.<sup>17</sup>

The only remaining alternative, Rāzī proposes, is alternate (4), which is to give priority to the decisive evidence of reason. This involves affirming the decisive evidence that the intellect establishes and denying scripture's apparent sense. Thus, when reason reaches a conclusion that opposes the apparent sense, one can either (i) divert the apparent sense to an allegorical or figurative sense; or (ii) admit that the meaning cannot be known and "entrust" it to God by remaining silent about it. In *Ta'ṣīs al-taqdīs* Rāzī presents this as a corollary to his interpretive principle, "the rationalist objection to scripture."

Since the falsity of the three<sup>18</sup> alternates has been proven, there remains only one [possibility], which is to affirm what the decisive rational evidence requires with respect to these scriptural evidences. Either one claims that they are not correct or one claims that they are correct but that their intended meaning is not their apparent sense. Now, if we permit *ta'wīl* then we devote ourselves to the method of discussing those figurative (or allegorical) interpretations in detail. But if we do not permit the nonliteral, then we entrust knowledge of its [meaning] to God. This is the general rule to which one should refer in the case of all the ambiguous verses (*mutashābihāt*).<sup>19</sup>

Before concluding, it will help to say something about what Rāzī's argument accomplishes. By insisting that rational evidence has the force to overturn scripture's apparent sense, Rāzī vindicates the Mu'tazilite method of *ta'wīl*. His solution implies that the apparent sense of scripture, because it did not make the cut of reason, does not hold much weight. It must consequently accommodate the conclusions reached by human reasoning. Moreover, to accommodate the conclusions of reason requires that the exegete divert the apparent sense to an allegorical or figurative sense that conforms to the conclusions reached by human reasoning.

17. Heer, "Priority of Reason," 191.

18. The text reads "four" here, which does not make sense. Rāzī means that three alternates, namely one through three, have been proven false.

19. Rāzī, *Ta'ṣīs al-taqdīs*, 172–173.

Rāzī's solution, however, does not simply repackaging Mu'tazilite *ta'wīl* in a new logical format. Rather, it retains old Sunnī ideas and synthesizes them with those of the Mu'tazila. For instance, in the aforementioned solution, Rāzī insists that there are occasions when reason does not reach a strong enough objection to overturn the apparent sense. He holds that in such cases, one is not permitted to apply *ta'wīl*. Rather, one must acknowledge that scripture's apparent sense is correct but that its intended meaning is unknowable. In such cases it is incumbent to refrain from applying *ta'wīl* and to remand or send back the meaning to God. Rāzī thus retains the old Sunnī formula, which is characteristic of his genealogical school of Ash'arism, that in some instances the meaning of the ambiguous verses does not fall within the boundaries of reason but is known only to God.<sup>20</sup>

### 3.2 THE PRIORITY OF REASON (ʿAQL) OVER SCRIPTURE (NAQL)

We have seen that Rāzī's theological objective is to reconcile the conclusions reached by the faculty of reason with the content of the Qur'ān and prophetic traditions. We have also seen that to achieve this goal Rāzī devised a hermeneutical principle that gave the intellective faculty the power to overturn the plain sense of the Qur'ān and prophetic traditions. In the following section I examine the way that Rāzī prioritizes reason (*taqdīm al-ʿaql*) over scripture when cases of conflict arise between these two sources of authority. This principle underpins Rāzī's system of methods, and it is crucial to his overall theory of Qur'ānic hermeneutics. And, like the rationalist objection to scripture (which I analyzed earlier), it distinguishes his methodology from that of his predecessors in the Islamic intellectual tradition.

To understand the essence and aim of Rāzī's argument that gives priority to reason over scripture (in cases when the two conflict), it is essential to consider the broader objectives of his methodology. Rāzī's main objective is to challenge intellectual groups that devalue the intellect as a source of knowledge (and the implications of reason) by giving disproportionate authority to

20. For a study of this issue in al-Ash'arī and his followers, see Frank, "Elements in the Development of the Teaching of al-Ash'arī," *passim*. See also Abrahamov, "The Bi-lā Kayfa Doctrine and Its Foundations in Islamic Theology," 365–379.

scripture. Such intellectuals, including Rāzī's colleagues within Ash'arism, adhere to the plain sense of the Qur'ān and prophetic traditions, and assent to the logical impossibilities that they entail. Rāzī directs his argument for the priority of reason over scripture against his opponents (some of whom are his colleagues within Ash'arism) who fail to realize the full implications of what reason can prove, who fail to understand the power of the rationalist objection to scripture and consequently fail to discern the unity of reason and scripture.

Before examining Rāzī's argument for the priority of reason over scripture and the rational theological ideas that support it, let me highlight what Rāzī thinks that his argument can accomplish. By postulating this principle, Rāzī hopes to show that when reason reaches conclusive evidence that opposes scripture's apparent sense, the only workable alternative (and hence the only method of resolving cases of conflict between *'aql* and *naql*) is to give priority to the authority of reason, which demands that one affirm the implications of the intellect (*muqtaḍī l-'aql*). He thinks he can do this by showing the falsity of the opposing position, which implies that a logical impossibility results when one invokes scripture's authority over the implications of human reasoning. Rāzī figures that if he can show this, then his opponents will be forced to concede that the authority of reason should be heeded when it reaches a conclusion that opposes scripture's apparent sense; and they will be forced to acknowledge that the interpretive method of *ta'wīl*, which diverts scripture's apparent sense to an alternative sense that conforms to the principles established by the intellect, is a logical necessity.

Rāzī claims to justify this hermeneutical principle using rational means. He considers it essential to show the necessity of *ta'wīl* without appealing to the authority of the Qur'ān and the prophetic traditions, and without relying on the scholarly authority of his teachers. His argument for *ta'wīl* thus exemplifies his intellectual autonomy and his dogged refusal to accept arguments on the basis of authority. Unlike other intellectuals (including the Mu'tazila but also his Ash'arite masters) who *assume* their hermeneutical principles, Rāzī considers it essential to *prove* his *ta'wīl* methodology, specifically his rule interpretation that gives primacy to reason over scripture, using reason alone.

In the following section I contend that in order to fully understand how Rāzī argues for the priority of reason (*'aql*) over scripture (*naql*), we must first grasp the crucial claim on which his argument hinges. This claim is that to give priority to



scripture over reason is to impugn (*qadh*) reason itself, which is exactly the same source that proves scripture's credibility. I also argue that in order to comprehend what Rāzī means by this perplexing claim, we must consider the principles that Rāzī establishes in his theological works, since these provide clues to understanding what he means by this claim. Only by examining how Rāzī's principles of hermeneutics, especially the priority of reason over scripture, are informed by his rationalistic theological principles will we be able to grasp how he reconciles the implications of reason with the content of scripture.

I begin with selections in which Rāzī discusses the priority of reason over scripture and in which he presents his argument from impugnement. As noted by Heer in his foundational article on the complex relationship between reason and scripture, there are several instances in which Rāzī argues for this point.<sup>21</sup> Rāzī writes:

- (a) As long as the existence of the creator, His knowledge, His power, and His sending the prophet is not affirmed through rational evidence, scripture is not proven true. So, impugnement of reason demands impugnement of reason and scripture. Thus the only remaining [option] is to affirm the veracity of reason and apply *ta'wīl* to scripture. This is a decisive proof (*burhān qāṭi'*).<sup>22</sup>
- (b) This [the third proposition] is impossible because we cannot know the truth of scriptural evidence unless we know through rational evidence the affirmation of the existence of the Creator, His Attributes, and the manner in which miracles indicates the truthfulness of prophet Muḥammad and the occurrence of miracles of Muḥammad. If we were to allow the impugnement of decisive rational evidence, then reason would stand accused, its word unacceptable. If this were the case, what it states would cease to be acceptable [as a doctrine that] establishing these principles, and if these fundamental doctrines could not be established, then scriptural evidence would cease to convey knowledge. It is therefore clear that the impugnement of reason for the purpose of validating scripture leads to the impugnement of both reason and scripture, and that is absurd.<sup>23</sup>

21. Heer, "The Priority of Reason," 183–185.

22. Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 22:6–7.

23. Rāzī, *Ta'sīs al-taqdīs*, 172–173. I have followed Heer's translation in *The Priority of Reason*, 184–185. Ibn Taymiyya repeats this argument in *Dar' ta'āruḍ al-'aql wa-l-naql*, 1:4.

- (c) As long as the existence of the Creator, His Attributes, and the veracity of the messengers have not first been established through decisive rational proofs, scriptural evidence cannot be established [as valid]. If we were to deny rational evidence in order to affirm the apparent sense of scripture, we would be denying the source by means of the derivative, and in that case the derivative would be more worthy of being false. That would result in a denial of both reason and scripture, and that is absurd.<sup>24</sup>
- (d) [If one] denies the decisive evidence that reason imparts by giving preponderance to the apparent sense that scripture imparts one would then follow a method that discredits rational evidences. And when one does that one falsifies God's unity, prophecy, and the Qur'ān. And giving preponderance to scriptural evidence would necessitate the impugnement of both rational and scriptural evidence. The only remaining option is to assert the veracity of rational evidences and apply *ta'wīl* to the apparent sense of scripture.<sup>25</sup>

In the above selections Rāzī offers an abbreviated outline of the principles that underlie his argument that assigns priority to reason over scripture. It is evident that Rāzī's argument aims to undermine a traditionalist position, or at least a position that later became characteristic of traditionalism, which is that it is permissible to invoke scriptural authority when the decisive evidence of reason opposes it. The force of Rāzī's argument is that to impugn scripture is to impugn reason. To understand what Rāzī means by this terse and cryptic claim, however, it is essential to consider the theological propositions that support it. These propositions, which he lists in the aforementioned (a) through (d), are characteristic of the Ash'arite tradition to which Rāzī belongs: (1) The Creator is knowing, powerful, and willing; (2) Prophecy is possible; (3) Miracles are possible; (4) Miracles confirm that the claimant of prophecy is truthful; (5) Muḥammad claimed to be a prophet and he performed miracles.

To justify the claim that an impugnement of scripture demands an impugnement of reason, Rāzī appeals to a logically prior assertion, which is that reason is the source (*aṣl*) of scripture. By this, Rāzī means that scripture's veracity is derived from propositions that are established by the human intellect's method of inferential reasoning. Rāzī's argument for the necessity of *ta'wīl*

24. Rāzī, *Al-Masā'il al-Khamsūn fī Uṣūl al-Dīn*, 39–40.

25. Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 7:151.

assumes these propositions. He proposes that because scripture's veracity is substantiated by such rational propositions, scripture's credibility as a source of knowledge is contingent upon the conclusions that are reached through rational means.<sup>26</sup>

The idea that scripture's credibility is contingent upon conclusions that are reached through rational means is crucial to Rāzī's overall argument for *ta'wīl*. The next step of his argument, which is the notion that an impugnement of scripture demands an impugnement of reason, is predicated on this principle, which is mentioned in (a) through (d). For Rāzī, to impugn a source of knowledge (such as reason or scripture) is to discredit it. In the above excerpts he proposes that to use scriptural evidence as a counterargument against reason results in an impossibility, since to do so demands that one "follow a method that discredits rational evidences." He implies that to give priority to the apparent sense of scripture over rational evidence is to discredit scripture itself as a source that "conveys knowledge" (b), since scripture owes its credibility to reason.

According to the methodology that I have described, the necessity of *ta'wīl* follows from the impossibility that rational evidence can be discredited. If scripture cannot serve as a counterargument to reason, the only true alternative is to affirm reason and divert scripture's apparent sense to a figurative sense in cases of a conflict between the two. To refrain from applying *ta'wīl*—as his opponents do—is to reject the very source that establishes core religious doctrines: God's unity, prophecy, and the Qur'ān itself (d). That is the "decisive proof" Rāzī was aiming for.

What is ultimately noteworthy about Rāzī's argument for *ta'wīl* that assigns priority to reason over scripture, is that it has a solid theoretical basis in theological principles that are entirely rationalistic. We have seen that Rāzī's justification for *ta'wīl*, which became the position of Sunnī orthodoxy, turns on the claim that scripture's veracity can be proven through rational means. To more fully understand how Rāzī substantiates this claim we need to understand how, in his view, reason vouches for scripture's credibility as a source of knowledge. In the following section I describe the steps that Rāzī takes to justify scripture's veracity. I focus on the ideas that he inherits from

26. This interpretation is supported by Ibn Taymiyya's excursus of Rāzī's methodology. See Ibn Taymiyya, *Dar' al-ta'āruḍ al-aql wa-l-naql*, 1:89.

his predecessors in Ash'arism, the difficulties that he encounters, and the way that he resolves them.

### 3.3 THE RATIONAL JUSTIFICATION FOR THE PROPHET'S CREDIBILITY

Rāzī's predecessors in the Ash'arite tradition sought to validate the prophet's truthfulness and scripture's credibility using the faculty of reason alone. This was a tall order, but it was an essential task. The proponents of Ash'arism eschewed reliance on blind faith, and they fought against Traditionalists who naively accepted the veracity of transmitted knowledge (*naql*). In order to avoid accepting the prophet's truthfulness and scripture's credibility on blind faith, they proposed that the content of the Sunna (that is, the assertions contained in the Qur'ān and prophetic traditions) could be proven through rational means. Furthermore, they proposed that once such assertions were proven to be true using rational means, they could be employed to prove additional theological beliefs and legal precepts.<sup>27</sup> For Rāzī, if the content of the Qur'ān and prophetic traditions was to be valid, it needed to be justified on entirely rationalistic grounds.

In order to explain the steps that Rāzī takes to justify the prophet's truthfulness and scripture's credibility, I begin by outlining the ways that his predecessors in the Ash'arite tradition (especially Juwaynī and Ghazālī) described the role of reason with respect to the scriptural canon.

Rāzī's predecessors within the Ash'arite tradition hold that all acquired knowledge, which is obtained through the process of discursive reasoning (and not known immediately like necessary knowledge), can be classified into one of three categories. They also hold that the core principles of Islamic

27. The claim that the prophet is truthful is foundational to Ash'arism. According to classical Ash'arite methodology, the data of revelation, including its ethical and legal code, are determined by God's command. It is only by validating this data using rational means that the ethical and legal code becomes obligatory. See Rāzī, *Muḥaṣṣal*, 68; Shihadeh, *The Teleological Ethics*, 104. The idea that, within Ash'arism, the content of revelation must be proven through reason alone, is pointed out by Frank in "The Science of *Kalām*," 30. See also, Heer, "The Proof for the Truthfulness of the Prophet," [Online] Available at <http://hdl.handle.net/1773/4873>; Özervarli, "The Qur'ānic Rational Theology of Ibn Taymiyya and his Criticism of the *Mutakallimūn*," 84.

belief (*uṣūl al-aqā'id*), which can be acquired through the process of discursive reasoning, fall into this threefold scheme. Juwaynī gives the gist of this classification in his *Irshād*. He writes:

Know—may God the exalted guide you rightly—that the principles of belief (*uṣūl al-aqā'id*) are divided into [1] what can be known through reason; it is not permissible to suppose that such beliefs can be known through scripture. [2] what can be known through revelation (*ṣamʿan*); it is not permissible to suppose that such beliefs can be known through reason. [3] that whose being known is possible through both scripture and reason.<sup>28</sup>

Juwaynī's threefold classification was adopted by Ghazālī in his *Iqtīṣād*. In the following excerpt Juwaynī explains the three subdivisions of acquired knowledge. He writes that acquired knowledge, which he defines as “what is not known through necessary knowledge,” can be divided into:

[1] What is known through rational evidence but not revealed law; [2] what is known through revealed law but not reason; [3] what is known through both together. As for what is known through rational evidence but not through revealed law, this includes [the assertions that] the world is temporally originated, that the world necessarily has a Creator, and that God is powerful, knowing, and willing. The revealed law is confirmed only when these beliefs are substantiated, since revealed law is proven to be true through [God's] speech.<sup>29</sup>

According to the threefold scheme that Juwaynī and Ghazālī present, the first epistemic category includes principles of Islamic belief (*uṣūl al-aqā'id*) that are known through inferential reasoning alone—that is, independent of the transmitted knowledge (*naql*) that is contained in the Qurʾān and prophetic traditions. These are rationalistic theological principles that are proven before one infers that God speaks and that His speech is veracious. This category includes the propositions that the world is temporally originated, and that the world has a creator who is powerful, knowing, and willing.<sup>30</sup>

28. Juwaynī, *Irshād*, 144.

29. Ghazālī, *Iqtīṣād*, 210.

30. Juwaynī, *Irshād*, 144; Ghazālī, *Iqtīṣād*, 210. For a graphic representation of proof by justification, see Saffo, *Al-Juwaynī's Thought and Methodology*, 98–99.

The second category includes scriptural data that are known through revelation alone. It includes information concerning the resurrection, reward and punishment, and all of the ethical and legal rules that pertain to what is good and bad, the obligatory and the forbidden, the recommended and the permitted.<sup>31</sup> Such data are not accessible to the intellect but known only after revelation.

The third category includes data that can be known through both reason and revelation. Although such information can be confirmed by both reason and revelation, it can be known only after revelation has occurred and after one has acquired knowledge that God's speech, which is the content of revelation, is veracious. Thus, certain theological propositions, for example that God can be seen in the hereafter, and that God alone has the power to create, fall within the boundaries of reason but can be affirmed only after one has proven that the content of the Qur'ān conforms to reason.<sup>32</sup>

According to Juwaynī and Ghazālī, the prophet's credibility and hence the truthfulness of scripture (which the prophet transmitted) can be proven through rational means. Both authors hold that before a believer assents to the veracity of scripture's content, he must first provide a rational justification for the prophet's truthfulness. Juwaynī writes:

As for what can be known through reason alone, [we claim that] every fundamental principle of religion can be known only after one has acquired knowledge of God's speech (sc. Scripture) and that it necessarily has the quality of veracity, since the data of revelation (*ṣam'īyyāt*) are grounded in God's speech. Thus before one affirms [God's] speech, one must acknowledge [principles] that cannot possibly be grasped through tradition.<sup>33</sup>

In this excerpt Juwaynī gives prominence to the faculty of reason as a methodological source of knowledge. He claims that it is necessary to validate the core principles of Islamic belief using rational means. Furthermore, he implies that the content of the Qur'ān can be considered credible only after God's existence and His attributes (knowledge, power, will, and speech) are established on the basis of inferential reasoning.

31. Juwaynī, *Irshād*, 144.

32. Juwaynī, *Irshād*, 144; Ghazālī, *Iqtiṣād*, 210.

33. Juwaynī, *Irshād*, 144.

Ghazālī's understanding of the role of reason with respect to scripture follows Juwaynī's pattern of reasoning, which is characteristic of classical Ash'arism. Following Juwaynī, Ghazālī claims that scripture's veracity can be proven using inferential reasoning (*bi-dalil al-ʿaql*)—that is, without relying on assertions that are contained in the Qur'ān or prophetic traditions. To accomplish this task he proposes to first validate that the Creator exists, and that the Creator is endowed with the attributes of power, knowledge, and will; and subsequently, that God speaks and that His speech is veracious.<sup>34</sup>

Rāzī endorses this method of reasoning, which was designed by his predecessors within classical Ash'arism. Following the Ash'arite tradition, he eschews the fideist position that naively accepts scripture's veracity on blind faith. He maintains that it is necessary to validate the prophet's credibility and scripture's veracity using the faculty of reason alone. In the *Muḥaṣṣal* Rāzī claims to ground the totality of knowledge that was transmitted by the prophet—the content of the Qur'ān and Sunna—in reason (*ʿaql*):

Transmitted knowledge (*naql*) depends on the truthfulness of God's messenger. Whatever knowledge depends on the veracity of God's messenger cannot be confirmed by scripture, since this would entail circular [reasoning].<sup>35</sup>

In *Mafātih al-ghayb* Rāzī also addresses the relationship between the faculty of reason and scripture. Here, too, he gives the faculty of reason the role of substantiating the content of scripture and argues that such "transmitted knowledge" is contingent upon the conclusions reached through human reasoning. He writes:

Reason is the source (*aṣl*) of transmitted knowledge (*naql*). This is because as long as the Creator's existence, knowledge, and power are not substantiated by rational evidence, and as long as the assertion that God sent the prophet is not substantiated by rational evidence, scripture's veracity is not confirmed.<sup>36</sup>

34. Ghazālī, *Iqtiṣād*, 210.

35. Rāzī, *Muḥaṣṣal*, 67–68. The importance of this problem for the Ash'arite tradition is pointed out by Shihadeh in *The Teleological Ethics*, 104.

36. Rāzī, *Mafātih al-ghayb*, 22:7. See the similar passages in Rāzī's *Masā'il al-khamsūn* and commentary on 3:5.

In these excerpts Rāzī argues that to substantiate scripture, which comprises the totality of knowledge that was transmitted by the prophet, it is necessary to first validate several propositions that serve as the foundation of his theological worldview: that the Creator exists, that He is knowing, and that He is powerful. Subsequently, it is necessary to validate the prophet's truthfulness. In his view, it is permissible to accede to the statements contained in scripture only after the prophet's veracity is substantiated by rational evidence. Following his predecessors in the Ash'arite tradition, Rāzī proposes that to use a statement that falls within the category of transmitted knowledge to accomplish this task is unacceptable, since employing scripture to prove itself would require that one reason circularly.

Rāzī draws on ideas that were formulated by Ghazālī when he argues that scripture's veracity must be proven through rational means before it is acceded to. In his *Qānūn al-ta'wīl*, which establishes a methodology for Qur'ānic interpretation that gives a preeminent role to reason, Ghazālī writes:

One should never deny the evidence (*burhān*) of reason, for reason does not lie. Were reason to lie, it might lie in establishing scripture, for it is through reason that we know scripture to be true. How can the truthfulness of a witness be known through the testimony of a lying character witness? Scripture is a witness for the details, and reason is the character witness for scripture.<sup>37</sup>

In the above passage Ghazālī argues that scripture cannot prove its own veracity; it therefore requires a witness, which is reason, to vouch for its credibility. He implies that if the prophet's truthfulness can be confirmed by rational evidence, then the statements contained in the Qur'ān and prophetic traditions can be accepted as true. These can then serve as the foundations to build further theological doctrines.

But how can one prove the prophet's credibility without relying on scripture? Rāzī's contemporary, Sayf al-Dīn al-Āmidī (d. 1233), identifies this as a major methodological difficulty within Ash'arism. He writes:

That the evidence of the miracle points to the truthfulness of the prophet cannot be based on scripture, because scriptural evidence depends on the prophet's

37. Ghazālī, *Qānūn al-ta'wīl*, 21; English trans. Heer, "The Canons of Ta'wīl," 52. See also Ghazālī's remarks in *Iqtisād*: "it is through intellectual proof that the truthfulness of what Muhammad mentioned is known," 2.



truthfulness. Were the truthfulness of the prophet to depend on it, then [the result would be] circular reasoning.<sup>38</sup>

The methodological stumbling block of Ashʿarism that Āmidī identifies can be encapsulated as follows: It is not acceptable to use the knowledge contained in scripture (*naql*) to establish the prophet's credibility. Such knowledge rests on the prophet's truthfulness; thus, to use such evidence to confirm the prophet's truthfulness would give rise to a circular argument. Such an argument would propose that Muḥammad's veracity is confirmed by the evidence of the miracles that he performed, and that the evidence of such miracles is confirmed because they are attested in the Qurʾān and prophetic traditions.

To reiterate, Rāzī's justification for *taʾwīl* turns on the claim that scripture's veracity can be proven through rational means. Like his predecessors in the Ashʿarite tradition, Rāzī acknowledges that scripture's veracity can be confirmed only by validating the prophet's truthfulness, and he recognizes that miracles provide evidence of this truthfulness. Therefore, to fully understand Rāzī's theory of *taʾwīl* and to discern whether it is internally consistent, we must examine how, in his view, miracles provide evidence of the prophet's truthfulness.

### 3.4 MIRACLES AND THE BOUNDARIES OF REASON

Rāzī grappled with the issue of miracles throughout his career.<sup>39</sup> In *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, which is a mature work, he acknowledges that the evidential value of miracles is weak, and he concedes that miracles fail to validate the prophet's

38. Āmidī, *Abkār al-afkār*, 25.

39. In his excursus on Qurʾān 18, 9–12 Rāzī justifies the existence of miracles that are carried out by the “friends of God” (*awliyāʾ*), but he does not discuss the core problem of the evidential value of miracles. His lengthy commentary on this verse has been translated by Gramlich in “Faḥr ad-dīn ar-Rāzī's Kommentar zu sure 18, 9–12,” 99–152. For a brief treatment of Rāzī's commentary on this verse, see Lagarde, *Les secrets de l'invisible*, 128–129. On the relationship between miracles and prophecy in Rāzī's thought, see Shihadeh, *The Teleological Ethics*, 129–232. On miracles in Islam, see Antes, *Prophetenwunder in der Aṣʿariya bis al-Gazālī* (Algazel), passim; *Encyclopedia of Islam* (second edition), “Muʿdjjiza” 7:295 (Wensinck).

truthfulness.<sup>40</sup> When he comments on Qur'ān 10, 58 in this work he implies that the prophet's credibility cannot be substantiated on the basis of miracles, which God performs on his behalf. In his theological manuals, however, Rāzī offers an alternative theory on the evidential value of miracles. In these works he insists that miracles do in fact validate the prophet's truthfulness. As we shall see, Rāzī attempts to justify this claim by appealing to prophetic authority and by availing himself of epistemological notions from the *kalām* tradition.

The assertion that miracles show evidence of the prophet's truthfulness is pivotal to Rāzī's overall program that sought to affirm the veracity of the scriptural canon (*naql*) using the faculty of reason alone.<sup>41</sup> But it presented a major stumbling block to his methodology: How can one prove that miracles show evidence of the prophet's truthfulness without relying on the Qur'ān or prophetic traditions?

It is in the final parts of his *Muḥaṣṣal* (as well as the final part of his other *kalām* works), which is devoted to Tradition (*sam'īyyāt*), that Rāzī attempts to justify the prophet's veracity.<sup>42</sup> Within these discussions Rāzī argues that miracles confirm his truthfulness, and he also raises the difficulty of the evidential value of miracles. Before examining the way that Rāzī resolves this problem, it is essential to situate his justification for the prophet's veracity within the broader context of his theological program by explaining its place within his investigation into Tradition. The central assertions that

40. Rāzī, *Mafātiḥ al-ghayb*, 17:114ff; Shihadeh, *The Teleological Ethics*, 134.

41. The nature of this problem is pointed out by Shihadeh in *The Teleological Ethics*, 104–107. That this was a major difficulty for Ash'arite theologians seems to have been initially pointed out (in Western scholarship) by Heer in "The Proof for the Truthfulness of the Prophet," [Online] Available at <http://hdl.handle.net/1773/4873>.

42. Rāzī divides the *Muḥaṣṣal* into four parts. In the first (6–71), he discusses primary notions (*al-'ulūm al-awwaliyya*) of knowledge, establishes the rules of correct reasoning (*aḥkām al-naẓar*), and considers the kinds of proofs (*al-dalīl*) through which knowledge can be attained. In the second (73–239) he investigates the divisions of objects of knowledge; and in the third (241–367) he investigates theology (*al-ilāhiyyāt*). The fourth (350–422) is devoted to Tradition (*sam'īyyāt*). For further discussion on the organization of Rāzī's *Muḥaṣṣal* (and a comparison with Ījī's later *kalām* work, the *Mawāqif*), see Sabra, "Science and Philosophy in Medieval Islamic Theology," 15–23. On Rāzī's epistemology, see the foundational work by van Ess, *Die Erkenntnislehre*, passim. For a discussion of the Avicennian philosophical innovations that Sunnī theologians integrated into their theological template (which was designed

Rāzī advances here, and the order in which he presents them, follow a logical arrangement that can be traced ultimately to Ash‘arī.<sup>43</sup> The main theological assertions that Rāzī argues for in his discussion on Tradition are the following: (a) that prophecy is possible; (b) that miracles are possible; (c) that miracles confirm the prophet’s truthfulness; and (d) that Muḥammad claimed to be a prophet and that he performed miracles.<sup>44</sup>

*That prophecy is possible.* Rāzī deems it necessary to argue that prophecy is possible in order to counter non-Islamic factions that have considered prophecy redundant. Within the *kalām* tradition there had been a history of refuting such factions, including the *barāhima*, who had denied the possibility of prophecy.<sup>45</sup> As noted by Shihadeh in his analysis of Rāzī’s views on prophecy, the *barāhima* proposed that if what the prophet proclaims can be known through human reasoning, then there is no benefit in his being sent; and, if what he proclaims does not conform to what can be proven by human reason, then it should not be accepted, since one should only accept what reason attests to.<sup>46</sup>

*That miracles are possible.* In his works of *kalām*, Rāzī attempts to show that it is possible for God to carry out miracles on behalf of the prophet by specifying the essential characteristics of miracles. Following his predecessors within Ash‘arism, Rāzī defines a miracle as a disruption in the sequence of events in the natural world. According to this view, God’s habit or custom (*sunna* or *‘āda*) determines the connection of events in the natural world, all of which were considered contingent on the direct creation of God. The turning of a rod into a serpent attributed to Moses, the revivification of the dead

by Māturīdī in the tenth century), see Wisnovsky, “One Aspect of the Avicennian Turn in Sunnī Theology,” 65–100.

43. For a discussion of this theme, see Frank, “The Science of *Kalām*,” 14. For an analysis of Ash‘arī’s methodology (especially the complex relationship between reason and revelation in his thought), see Frank, “Al-Ash‘arī’s conception of the nature and role of speculative reasoning in theology,” 136–154.

44. See Rāzī, *Muḥaṣṣal*, 350ff; *Kitāb al-Arba‘īn*, 2:75ff; *Al-Ishāra fī ‘ilm al-kalām*, 169ff.

45. On the *barāhima*, see Calder, “The Barāhima: Literary Construct and Historical Reality,” 40–51; Abrahamov, “The Barāhima Enigma: A Search for a New Solution,” 72–91.

46. Shihadeh, *The Teleological Ethics*, 133. Rāzī, *Muḥaṣṣal*, 358; *Al-Ishāra fī ‘ilm al-kalām*, 169; The argument of the *barāhima* is articulated earlier by Juwaynī. See *Irshād*, 124; *Niẓāmiyya*, 214–215; *Lum‘a’* (trans. Saflo), 257–258. For a lengthy discussion on the doubts that the *barāhima* raised about prophecy, see Abd al-Jabbār, 15:109ff.

attributed to Jesus, and the splitting of the moon attributed to Muḥammad are all examples of disruptions within the sequence of events in the natural world, and all of these were considered miracles that God performs on a prophet's behalf to verify his claims to prophecy.<sup>47</sup>

To maintain this thesis, Rāzī (as well as Juwaynī before him) draws a distinction between prophets and saints. He differentiates miracles, which are the distinguishing characteristics of prophets, from saintly marvels (*karāmāt*) and sorcery (*irḥās*).<sup>48</sup> Because both miracles and saintly marvels disrupt the natural sequence of events, Rāzī considers it necessary to mark these off from one another; if one cannot differentiate a prophetic miracle from a saintly marvel, then one cannot be certain of the prophet's truthfulness.

For Rāzī, an act must satisfy several conditions in order to qualify as a miracle.<sup>49</sup> These conditions were specified by his predecessors in the Ash'arite tradition, and later theologians (including Baiḍāwī and Iṣfahānī) also list them in their discussions of prophecy and miracles.<sup>50</sup> First, to qualify as a miracle, an act must be executed by God, and it must disrupt the sequence of events in the natural order. By this rationale, Moses' turning of a staff into a serpent and Muḥammad's splitting of the moon satisfy this condition. Events in the natural order that are habitual, however, such as the rising of the sun, fail to qualify as miracles. In his discussion of miracles, Rāzī inherits a significant but problematic inference from his predecessors within Ash'arism: the disruption in the sequence of events in the natural order is evidential of God's purpose, which is to confirm the truthfulness of the claimant at whose hands the act is carried out.<sup>51</sup>

Second, to qualify as a miracle, an act must also be associated with a claim to prophecy—the claimant must announce and describe the miracle that God will perform. In Rāzī's view, this condition distinguishes a miracle from a saintly marvel. While both miracle and saintly marvel disrupt the sequence of events in the natural world, only the former occurs in accordance with

47. Rāzī, *Al-Ishāra fi 'ilm al-kalām*, 169ff.

48. Juwaynī, *Irshād*, 129–132; Rāzī, *Muḥaṣṣal*, 350.

49. This is first noted by Ceylan in *Theology and Tafsir in the Major Works of Fakhr al-Din al-Razi*, 167. On miracles in the Ash'arite tradition, see Antes, *Prophetenwunder in der Ash'ariyya*, passim. On miracles in Islamic philosophy, see Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, 45–52.

50. Baiḍāwī and Iṣfahānī follow Rāzī; see *Nature, Man, and God in Medieval Islam*, 2:968–984.

51. Juwaynī, *Niẓāmiyya*, 218–219; idem, *Irshād*, 126; Rāzī, *Muḥaṣṣal*, 353–357.

a claim to prophecy. This condition makes it impossible for an imposter to claim a miracle that someone else performed in the past.<sup>52</sup>

A final distinguishing characteristic of a miracle is that it is tied to a challenge (*al-tahaddī*) that does not meet with opposition, i.e., another act that invalidates it as a miracle (*maʿa ʿadam al-muʿāraḍa*). An act that is similar to the challenging act would falsify the alleged miracle, since it would show that it is not a *singular* act that breaks the course of natural events but simply an *unusual* one.<sup>53</sup>

*That miracles confirm the prophet's truthfulness.* In the final part of the *Muḥaṣṣal* (and in the final part of his other *kalām* works), Rāzī proposes that miracles confirm the prophet's truthfulness. In the *Muḥaṣṣal* he notes that the assertion that miracles show evidence of the prophet's veracity can be corroborated by three supplementary propositions (*maqāmāt*): (1) That a miracle is an act of God; (2) That the purpose of the miracle is to confirm prophecy; (3) That whomever God confirms as a prophet is truthful.<sup>54</sup> In the *Muḥaṣṣal* (as well as in *Kitāb al-Arbāʿīn*) Rāzī's objective is to show that miracles, which are carried out by God on the prophet's behalf, can serve as justification for the prophet's veracity.

*That Muḥammad claimed to be a prophet and that he performed miracles.* When Rāzī argues that Muḥammad claimed to be a prophet and that he performed miracles, he relies on human testimony, following the line of reasoning from classical Islamic theology. He corroborates these assertions by appealing to the "recurrent reports" about Muḥammad that were passed down through multiple chains of transmission (*khbar mutawātir*). Like his masters, Rāzī thinks that the veracity of the content of such reports is guaranteed by firm conviction in human testimony, which presumed that it was impossible for a group of transmitters to collude and fabricate a lie.<sup>55</sup>

Now that we have outlined the principal assertions that Rāzī argues for when he investigates Tradition (*samʿiyyāt*), we can turn to the major issue

52. Juwaynī, *Niẓāmiyya*, 222–223; Juwaynī, *Irshād*, 130; Rāzī, *Muḥaṣṣal*, 350.

53. Rāzī, *Muḥaṣṣal*, 350; Zamakhsharī, *A Muʿtazilite Creed*, 79 (of Arabic text); Baiḍāwī, *Nature, Man and God in Medieval Islam* (trans.), 2:968; Juwaynī, *Irshād*, 126; idem, *Niẓāmiyya*, 218–224. Ibn Fūrak, *Maqālāt* (cited in Griffel, 338n).

54. Rāzī, *Muḥaṣṣal*, 353–354.

55. Rāzī, *Arbāʿīn*, 2:80–81; *Muḥaṣṣal*, 351; *Ishāra*, 177. For further discussion of this topic in Islamic theology, see Griffel, "Al-Ġazālī's Concept of Prophecy," 101–144.

of difficulty that brought his rationalistic methodology to the ultimate test of reason and threatened the internal consistency of the methodology he intended to establish for *tafsir*: How do miracles show evidence of the prophet's truthfulness?

I begin by noting that Rāzī was not the first theologian within the history of Sunnī thought to hit upon this difficulty. Although Ash'arī himself did not question the inference that miracles show evidence of the prophet's truthfulness, Juwaynī recognized and challenged the problematic nature of this inference. In both the *Irshād* and the *Nizāmiyya* he questions the evidential value of miracles. In the *Irshād* he writes:

Know—may God the exalted guide you—that a miracle does not provide evidence for the prophet's truthfulness in the way that rational evidences point to what they signify (*'alā madlūlātihā*). This is because rational evidence is connected to what it signifies in its essence, and it is not possible for it to be conceived in the mind without its signifier. That is not the way that miracles [indicate the truthfulness of the prophet].<sup>56</sup>

In the aforementioned selection Juwaynī challenges the inference that miracles show evidence that a person who claims prophecy is truthful. He insists that to qualify as a rational proof, the *dalāla*, which binds together the signifier and signified, must be strong. Moreover, he defines a strong connection as a necessary connection between the signifier and signified. In the case of a necessary connection, the mind is led necessarily to the signified when it supposes the signifier. For example, when it supposes that an entity is temporally originated (*ḥudūth*), it necessarily posits that such an entity has an agent that produced it.<sup>57</sup>

Juwaynī argues that such a strong connecting link is absent in cases of miracles. He maintains that it is possible to conceptualize the occurrence of a miracle without also supposing that the agent of the miracle who claims prophecy is truthful; and he concludes that the connecting link between the miracle ("the signified") and the truthfulness of a person's claim to prophecy

56. Juwaynī, *Irshād*, 132; see also Juwaynī, *Nizāmiyya*, 225.

57. On the role of *dalīl* (the signifier) in Islamic theology, see van Ess, "The Logical Structure of Islamic Theology," 26–42; idem, *Die Erkenntnislehre*, 357ff.

is weak. To illustrate this point, he cites Moses' transformation of a staff into a snake. He argues that when the mind supposes such a transformation, it is not necessarily led to believe that Moses, the person who claims prophecy, is veracious. For this reason, it is not reasonable to conclude that miracles show evidence of a person's truthfulness.

Juwaynī thus admits that the faculty of reason reached a dead end when it attempted to justify the prophet's truthfulness on the basis of miracles. In his view, the solution to this difficulty exceeded the boundaries of the intellect. Thus, in the *Irshād* he states that the proposition that miracles provide evidence of a person's truthfulness "fall[s] outside the correspondences of indications of the intellects" (*fa-qad kharajat al-mu'jizāt 'ān maḍāhat dalālat al-'uqūl*). And in both the *Irshād* and the *Nizāmiyya* he concludes that although there is no rational proof that miracles show evidence of the prophet's truthfulness, a miracle nonetheless effectively confirms the status of the prophet's word (*tanazzala manzila al-taṣdīq bi-l qawl*).<sup>58</sup>

Ghazālī, too, casts doubt on the inference that miracles show evidence of the prophet's truthfulness. In his monograph *Al-Ghazālī and the Ash'arite School*, Frank notes that Ghazālī (in his autobiography and in the *Qistās*) questioned the evidential value of miracles, determining that their value is ambivalent or inconclusive.<sup>59</sup> His solution, which has been amply documented by several scholars, recognizes that a miracle cannot easily be distinguished from sorcery; and it proposes that a person can only attain "certain knowledge" that Muḥammad is a veritable prophet through experience—that is, by trying out Muḥammad's prescriptions for religious ritual.<sup>60</sup> Thus, like his teacher Juwaynī, Ghazālī acknowledged that miracles lacked the epistemic value to corroborate the prophet's truthfulness.

Āmidī, Rāzī's younger contemporary, also questions the evidential value of miracles. He argues that the evidence that a miracle conveys for the prophet's truthfulness fails to qualify as a rational proof (*dalāla 'aqliyya*). Following Juwaynī's lead, he asserts that in order to qualify as a rational proof, there

58. Juwaynī, *Nizāmiyya*, 225; *Irshād*, 132; *Luma'* (trans. Saflo), 259.

59. Frank, *Al-Ghazālī and the Ash'arite School*, 67; Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology*, 195.

60. On Ghazālī's proof, see Menn, "The Discourse on the Method and the Tradition of Intellectual Autobiography," 169–172.



must be a strong connection between the signifier and the signified. Like Juwaynī, Āmidī argues that if the occurrence of a miracle were in fact evidential of the truthfulness of a person who claims prophecy, then the truthfulness of that person would be supposed when the miracle is conceptualized. He goes on to cite plenty of instances of miracles in which such evidence is absent, including miracles in times when there are no messengers. For him, the miracles that occurred in times when there were no messengers indicate the absence of a necessary connection between miracles and the prophet's truthfulness.<sup>61</sup>



Like some of Rāzī's predecessors and contemporaries in the Ash'arite tradition, the Mu'tazila questioned the inference that miracles show evidence of the prophet's truthfulness. They discerned that this problematic inference was foundational to the system of methods that Rāzī designed for Sunnī theology. By contesting Rāzī's claim that the miracles that God creates on the prophet's behalf show evidence of the prophet's veracity (and by implication, the veracity of his message), the Mu'tazila called into question the entire system of methods that Rāzī designed to justify the scriptural canon (*naql*).<sup>62</sup>

Some of the reservations that the Mu'tazila expressed about the evidential value of miracles are outlined by 'Abd al-Jabbār (d. 1025). In his *Mughnī*, 'Abd al-Jabbār argues that although the occurrence of a miracle shows evidence of a person's claim to prophethood, it implies neither that such a person is truthful nor that the content of his religious message is veracious. Thus, while the miracles enumerated in the Islamic tradition—for example, Moses' levitation of a mountain and his parting of the sea—confirm that the souls of certain persons have great powers, they do not provide evidence that those who perform miracles are prophets.<sup>63</sup>

In addition to expressing general reservations about the evidential value of miracles, the Mu'tazila also critiqued the inferential reasoning that Rāzī used to justify the prophet's truthfulness. One of their arguments is

61. Āmidī, *Abkār al-afkār*, 25.

62. Shihadeh, *The Teleological Ethics*, 105.

63. 'Abd Al-Jabbār, *Mughnī*, 15:147–148. I am grateful to my colleague, Suleiman Mourad, for referring me to this passage.



particularly incisive, and it is worth analyzing and elaborating upon since it threatened the internal coherency of Rāzī's methodology.

The Mu'tazila argued that Rāzī had left open the possibility that God can lead human beings astray (*iḍlāl*), and they implied that such a realizable possibility undermined the internal coherence of his methodology. They rightly maintained that, according to Rāzī's theory of the creation of human action (*khalq al-af'āl*), God can create evil acts by engendering the state of "unbelief" in an individual. The Mu'tazila argued that if God can do this, then He can also create the quality of truthfulness in a liar, thereby confirming the truthfulness of an imposter (*taṣḍīq al-kādhīb*). They thus implied that Rāzī's system of methods lacked a criterion that would enable one to differentiate an imposter from a genuine prophet.

The question whether it is possible for God to deceive human beings has been recently discussed by Shihadeh in his monograph on Rāzī's ethics. Citing evidence from Rāzī's *Uṣūl al-Dīn* and *Nihāyat al-ʿuqūl*, Shihadeh proposes that for Rāzī, it is "improbable to the extent of being inconceivable" that God would create miracles at the hands of an imposter. He argues that "the thrust of [Rāzī's] defence seems to be that lying is an extremely trivial, lowly and ignoble act that an agent would resort to only because of his weakness, and for which he may be viewed with contempt" and that "lying contradicts God's absolute power and majesty, affirmed by Ash'arīs, without being considered intrinsically bad."<sup>64</sup>

It will be worthwhile to revisit the manner in which Rāzī approached this difficulty, since as the Mu'tazila discerned, it relates directly to the way that he justified the prophet's veracity. In the following section I investigate how Rāzī dealt with the problem of the evidential value of miracles by analyzing the controversies he held with his Mu'tazilite opponents on this issue. I argue that Rāzī solved the problem of how miracles show evidence of the prophet's truthfulness by both invoking prophetic authority and availing himself of epistemological tools that he inherited from his masters in classical Ash'arism. I also argue that Rāzī's responses to the Mu'tazila support the theory (initially proposed by Shihadeh) that his worldview precludes the possibility that God can confirm an imposter as a prophet. An appropriate starting point for discussion will be the Mu'tazilite objections to Rāzī's

64. Shihadeh, *The Teleological Ethics*, 107.

position and the latter's replies, all of which Rāzī records when he deals with the creation of human acts (*khalq al-af'āl*).<sup>65</sup> In the *Muḥaṣṣal* he presents the Mu'tazilite objection to his position as follows:

We [sc. the Mu'tazila] do not concede the point that God creates a miracle for the sake of confirming (*al-taṣḍīq*) [the prophet's truthfulness], since there is no doubt that the miracle does not imply such a confirmation. Since the purpose of the miracle is not to confirm truthfulness it cannot serve as evidence for the confirmation of truthfulness [. . .] We submit that God affirmed [the prophet's] truthfulness. But why do you assert that whomever God confirms as truthful is [in fact] truthful? For, according to you, God is the creator of unbelief and base acts. If that is not repugnant to God, why is it not impossible for Him to affirm the truthfulness of an imposter? This final question applies to our position but not to that of the Mu'tazila.<sup>66</sup>

In *Kitāb al-Arbā'in* Rāzī again raises the question of whether the occurrence of a miracle shows evidence of the prophet's veracity. When he discusses the creation of human acts (*khalq al-af'āl*), Rāzī reiterates the objections that he listed in the *Muḥaṣṣal*. The incisive argument that I have outlined above reappears in the second argument of the third objection. This Mu'tazilite objection may be translated as follows:

We [sc. the Mu'tazila] submit that the agent of miracles is God. But why do you claim that God performs miracles for the purpose of establishing [the prophet's] truthfulness? There are two viewpoints that corroborate this argument. The first is that you have established forceful arguments for the impossibility that God's acts and ordinances are a cause for the purposes and aims of a thing. If this is so, then the assertion that God only creates these miracles for the purpose of establishing the truthfulness [of the prophet] is impossible.<sup>67</sup>

65. For a more thorough treatment of human action in Rāzī's system of thought, see Shihadeh, *The Teleological Ethics*, 13–44. On the Mu'tazila and human action, see Madelung, "The Late Mu'tazila and Determinism: The Philosophers' Trap," 245–257. For a discussion of human action in Ash'arism, see Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology*, 128–133. On theories of "compulsion" (the total determination of acts by God) in Islamic theology, see Gimaret, *Théories de l'acte humain en théologie musulmane*, passim.

66. Rāzī, *Muḥaṣṣal*, 354.

67. Rāzī, *Kitāb al-Arbā'in*, 2:101. Rāzī presents a parallel argument in *Maḥālib*, 8:33.

In these excerpts Rāzī's Mu'tazilite opponents concede that it is possible for God to send prophets and that God is the essential agent of miracles, but they object to the assertion that miracles show evidence of the prophet's veracity. The Mu'tazila argue that God may have any number of purposes in mind when He carries out a miracle on behalf of a prophet; and they imply that Rāzī's system of methods leaves open the possibility that God can perform a miracle on behalf of an imposter and thereby confirm his truthfulness. By pointing out that Rāzī lacked a criterion for distinguishing a veritable prophet from an imposter, the Mu'tazila discerned a flaw in his methodology and challenged the system of methods that he designed for the Sunnī theological tradition.<sup>68</sup>

The objections that the Mu'tazila raised and the difficulties that Juwaynī and Ghazālī hit upon disclose a major obstacle in the system of methods that Rāzī designed to justify the prophet's credibility and to corroborate the content of the Qur'ān and Sunna (*naql*): How can miracles verify the prophet's truthfulness if their evidential value is weak?

It is unclear whether Rāzī recognized that this difficulty threatened the foundation of his methodology. He did, however, attempt to find a way over this stumbling block by appealing to prophetic authority. In both the *Muḥaṣṣal* and *Kitāb al-Arbā'in* Rāzī appeals to prophetic traditions that attest to the historical occurrence of miracles. In these theological texts he adduces such traditions to argue that past miracles compelled their audiences to believe in the truthfulness of prophetic claims. To gain a deeper understanding of how Rāzī works out this difficulty, let us turn to his replies to the Mu'tazila, which he records in the *Muḥaṣṣal* and *Kitāb al-Arbā'in*. In the former text Rāzī writes:

We hold that it is on account of (*limā*) what we stated earlier, which is that all contingent entities come into being through God's power, that we know that the creator of the miracle is God the exalted. And the reason (*limā*) we said the

68. This was a clever objection, since it did not apply to the Mu'tazila. According to the Mu'tazila, God is obliged to act for the benefit of human beings, and one of the ways that He does this is by sending prophets to mankind. It is impossible for Him to confirm an imposter as a prophet, since this would impute a repugnant act to God and demand that He act contrary to reason. For further discussion on Mu'tazilite ideas of what is possible for God, see Frank, "Can God Do What Is Wrong?," 69–79.

miracle is a sign that leads one to accept prophecy is illustrated by the following prophetic tradition: “O God, if I am truthful in the claim of my message then eclipse the moon.” When the prophet uttered this statement the moon was eclipsed, and we were compelled to believe that God the exalted confirmed [Muḥammad] in his claim to prophecy. For this reason whoever in times past acknowledges that this miracle is an act of God also acknowledges that the person who claims prophecy is truthful and he has no doubt about it. And the permissibility of other possibilities (*al-aqsām*) commensurate with the intellect does not impugn this necessary knowledge (*al-ʿilm al-ḍarūrī*), as we have illustrated with this example.<sup>69</sup>

In the *Arbaʿin* Rāzī provides a similar response to the objection raised by the Muʿtazila. He writes:

Objection: It is possible that the purpose of the creation of miracles is something apart from confirmation [of the prophet’s truthfulness]. Our position is that we do not concede this point, but rather claim that the miracle is established with the purpose of leading one to realize this acceptance of the prophet. The evidence for this comes from the occasion when Moses—upon him be peace—said: “God, if I am truthful in my claim as a messenger, make this mountain stand in the air above their heads.” Then all the people observed that whenever they accepted him the mountain would move farther away from them; whenever they contemplated rejecting him it drew near to collapsing on them. Because of this everyone knows by necessary knowledge (*bi-l-ḍarūra*) that the purpose of this overshadowing is to confirm the messenger in his claim [to prophecy].<sup>70</sup>

Now that you know this, we say: We have made clear that the fact that the miracle is there to indicate the confirmation is known necessarily, as we gave in the example of the drawing near of the mountain (*iẓlāl al-jibāl*). The most that can be said about this is that the miracle is created for another purpose, namely to deceive (*al-idlāl*). Indeed we say that when the existence of a thing is known with necessary knowledge it is not possible for its contrary to impugn that necessary knowledge, as we have made clear in this preamble.<sup>71</sup>

69. Rāzī, *Muḥaṣṣal*, 361.

70. Rāzī, *Kitāb al-Arbaʿin*, 2:105–106.

71. Rāzī, *Kitāb al-Arbaʿin*, 2:107.

In these excerpts Rāzī justifies the prophet's veracity by pointing out the ways that past miracles have affected their audience. In both the *Muḥaṣṣal* and *Kitāb al-Arbāʿīn*, he cites certain prophetic traditions that attest to our past experience of miracles; and he adduces human experience of past miracles as proof that miracles point to the prophet's veracity.<sup>72</sup>

When Rāzī argues that past miracles corroborate the prophet's veracity, he avails himself of epistemological tools that he took over from his masters in the *kalām* tradition. In the prophetic traditions cited earlier, Rāzī utilizes the epistemic notion of "necessary knowledge" (*al-ʿilm al-darūri*) as a means of explaining how past miracles, which God carried out on the prophet's behalf, effectively instilled their audience with knowledge of the prophet's truthfulness.<sup>73</sup>

Thus, in the *Muḥaṣṣal* he refers to a tradition according to which Muḥammad eclipses the moon. Here he proposes that the people who witnessed the moon's eclipse were "compelled to believe"—that is, that they were imparted with necessary knowledge—that Muḥammad was truthful in his claim to prophecy. In the *Arbāʿīn* Rāzī argues along similar lines, suggesting that the audience that witnessed Moses' levitation of the mountain was compelled to believe (again because they were imparted with necessary knowledge) that he was truthful in his claim to prophecy.

What is ultimately significant about Rāzī's position (which we should recall is a response to an objection raised by a Muʿtazilite) is that it precludes the possibility that God can confirm the truthfulness of an imposter (*taṣḍīq al-kādhīb*). By proposing (on the basis of prophetic authority) that a miracle effectively instills its audience with necessary knowledge that its agent is truthful, Rāzī closes off the possibility that God can lead human beings astray (*iḍlāl*) by confirming an imposter. My interpretation of Rāzī's position is confirmed by Rāzī's own gloss on the expression "necessary knowledge." In the *Muḥaṣṣal* Rāzī explains that by "necessary knowledge," he means knowledge that cannot be impugned and is incontrovertible. And in *Kitāb al-Arbāʿīn* he explains that

72. For a treatment of the theme of knowledge of past historical events in Muslim theology and law, see Weiss, "Knowledge of the Past: The Theory of *Tawātūr* According to Ghazālī," 81–105.

73. For further discussion on "necessary knowledge" in Islamic theology, see Abrahamov, "Necessary Knowledge in Islamic Theology," 20–32. See also the foundational discussion by van Ess in *Die Erkenntnislehre*, 113–128.

such knowledge cannot be impugned although there may be “other possibilities commensurate with the intellect.” By this he means that the force of this knowledge imparts us with psychological certainty that other alternatives are not realizable—that they fall outside the boundaries of reason.

The upshot of this is that in Rāzī’s view, if God were to confirm an imposter as a truthful prophet, we would have a case of a logical impossibility: the claimant would be both truthful and a liar. In such a scenario, the claimant would have the positive perfection of sincerity as well as its privation of insincerity. The mind, in this instance, would be led to affirm that the claimant is both truthful and an imposter. But because these two propositions cannot be realized together, the confirmation of an imposter as a truthful prophet falls in the category of a rational impossibility.<sup>74</sup>

### 3.5 THE RECEPTION OF RĀZĪ’S METHODOLOGY IN ISLAMIC TRADITIONALISM: IBN TAYMIYYA ON RĀZĪ

We have illustrated how Rāzī devised rationalistic principles to justify the practice of *taʿwīl* and to argue that it is a logical necessity. We have also shown that his theory of *taʿwīl* assumes a pivotal theological idea, which is that scripture (*naql*) can be proven through rational means (*ʿaql*). These ideas had a long afterlife in Sunnī theology. Heer points out that illustrious Sunnī theologians, including Īǧī (d. 756/1355), Taftazānī (d. 792/1390), and Jurjānī (d. 816/1413), enthusiastically adopted Rāzī’s *taʿwīl* methodology. These theologians abided by Rāzī’s model of *taʿwīl* and used it to harmonize the implications of reason with the Qurʾān and the prophetic Sunna.<sup>75</sup>

Not all intellectual movements, however, embraced the new intellectual program that Rāzī forged for Sunnī theology. The opposition to his methodology emerged from Islamic traditionalism some one hundred years after his death.<sup>76</sup> Within Islamic traditionalism, it was Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328)—Rāzī’s

74. Before Rāzī, Juwaynī advanced this argument. He maintains that this is a rational impossibility that the mind does not accept (*taṣḍīq al-kādhīb mustaḥīl fī qaḍīyāt al-ʿuqūl*). See Juwaynī, *Irshād*, 133.

75. Heer, “The Priority of Reason,” 181–195.

76. On Islamic traditionalism, see Abrahamov, “Ibn Taymiyya on the Agreement of Reason with Tradition,” 256–272; Abrahamov, *Islamic Theology: Traditionalism and Rationalism*,

greatest opponent and expositor—who fought most forcefully against his agenda. He perspicaciously recognized the importance of Rāzī’s logical argument for *ta’wīl*. In his *Dar’ ta’āruḍ l-‘aql wa-l-naql* (“Averting the Conflict between Reason and [religious] Tradition”), he implicitly acknowledges that Rāzī’s justification for *ta’wīl* constituted the most innovative and advanced methodology of its time.<sup>77</sup>

Having realized that Rāzī’s rationalistic methodology threatened Traditionalism, which offered an alternative intellectual outlook that vested supreme authority in the Qur’ān and prophetic Sunna, Ibn Taymiyya sought to undermine its foundations. This was a lifelong project for him (as he indicates in the *Dar’*), and the *Dar’* is just one of several voluminous works that he dedicates to refuting Rāzī’s rationalistic program.<sup>78</sup> When he expatiates on Rāzī’s system of methods, Ibn Taymiyya uses a wide variety of approaches to undermine the logical justification for *ta’wīl*. Forty-four arguments (*wujūh*) alone of his excursus are devoted to Rāzī’s justification for the rationalist objection to scripture and the priority of reason over scripture.

In the following section I use Ibn Taymiyya’s lengthy investigations into Rāzī’s system of methods to probe the ways that he responded to Rāzī’s *ta’wīl* methodology. Recently, several scholars have noted that Ibn Taymiyya’s masterpiece, *Dar’ ta’āruḍ al-‘aql wa-l-naql* (“Averting the Conflict between Reason and [religious] Tradition”) can help us understand not only his critique of the *kalām* schools but also the entire intellectual landscape

passim; Makdisi, “L’Islam Hanbalisant,” 211–244; Graham, “Traditionalism in Islam: An Essay in Interpretation,” 495–522; Fück, “Die Rolle des Traditionalismus im Islam,” 1–32; Makdisi, “Remarks on Traditionalism in Islamic Religious History,” 77–87. For a reconsideration of Ibn Taymiyya’s innovative methodology (which challenges the scholarly views of traditionalism) and for a thorough treatment of the Satanic Verses incident in Ibn Taymiyya’s thought, see Ahmed, “Ibn Taymiyya and the Satanic Verses,” 67–124. On Ibn Taymiyya’s hermeneutics and his attitude toward the *tafsīr* tradition, see Saleh, “Ibn Taymiyya and the Rise of Radical Hermeneutics,” 123–163. A partial translation of Ibn Taymiyya’s work appears in McAuliffe, “Ibn Taymiyyah’s Muqaddimatun fi usul al-tafsīr,” 35–43.

77. Ibn Taymiyya, *Dar’ al-ta’āruḍ al-‘aql wa-l-naql*, 1:22. According to the editor (Sālim), Ibn Taymiyya composed the *Dar’* between 713/1313 and 717/1317. See Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyya’s Theodicy of Perpetual Optimism*, 11.

78. In the *Dar’* Ibn Taymiyya indicates that he composed a refutation of Rāzī’s *Muḥaṣṣal* (This work is not extant.) He also composed a refutation of Rāzī’s *Ta’sīs al-taqdīs*, which is titled *Bayān talbīs al-Jahmiyya fi ta’sīs bida’ihim al-kalāmiyya*.



of classical Islam.<sup>79</sup> Michot (2000) calls the *Darʿ* a “scholastic enterprise” with a “deconstructivist” agenda, and he lists the sweep of intellectuals (both Muslim and non-Muslim) whose systems of thought Ibn Taymiyya attempts to refute. He also asserts that the *Darʿ* testifies to Ibn Taymiyya’s reputation as one of the most insightful intellectuals within the Islamic tradition; and that he ranks, after Rāzī, as the most insightful interpreter of philosophy in the Sunnī world.<sup>80</sup> More recently (2010), Özervarli points out that Ibn Taymiyya’s Traditionalist agenda can be understood only against the backdrop of Rāzī’s rationalizing tendencies in *kalām*.<sup>81</sup>

In what follows, I analyze how Ibn Taymiyya disassembles Rāzī’s argument for *taʿwīl*, and I describe how he reinterprets it from the perspective of Traditionalism. By drawing attention to the reception of Rāzī’s *taʿwīl* methodology in Islamic traditionalism, I highlight the direction that Ibn Taymiyya wished to take Islamic theology. I begin by considering the claims that Ibn Taymiyya makes about the relationship between reason and scripture in Rāzī’s system of thought. These claims are noteworthy because they disclose Ibn Taymiyya’s traditionalist judgments, which distort the essentials of Rāzī’s methodology. The remarks I wish to examine appear in Ibn Taymiyya’s reflections on Rāzī’s *Testament*.

In his *Testament*, Rāzī makes claims about his religious convictions and the aims of his rationalistic works. In his study of this document, Street (1997) notes that Rāzī dictated the *Testament* to his student Ibrāhīm b. Abī Bakr ʿAlī al-Iṣfahānī on Sunday, 21 Muḥarram of 606/1209. He shows that the *Testament* was incorporated into a number of biographical dictionaries, and that parts of the document are quoted by later theologians, including

79. As Michot notes, Abrahamov (1992) and Heer (1993) are the first occidental scholars to take interest in the *Darʿ*. In 1993 Hallaq also published his translation of Ibn Taymiyya’s *Against the Greek Logicians*, the introduction of which reveals the strategies Ibn Taymiyya uses to critique other intellectual movements including the proponents of the unity of being. More recently, Michot (2003), el Omari (2010), and Özervarli (2010) discuss various aspects of Ibn Taymiyya’s thought.

80. Michot, “Vanités intellectuelles. . . L’impasse des rationalismes selon le rejet de la contradiction d’Ibn Taymiyya,” 599.

81. Özervarli, “The Qur’ānic Rational Theology of Ibn Taymiyya and his Criticism of the Mutakallimūn,” 79. A similar point is implied by el Omari in “Ibn Taymiyya’s ‘Theology of the Sunna’ and his Polemics with the Ashʿarites.”



Ibn Taymiyya. The earliest version of the complete document appears in Ibn Abī Uṣaybi‘ah (d. 668/1270). It also appears in various forms in Dhahabī (d. 748/1348), Subkī (d. 771/1370), Ṣafadī (d. 764/1362-3), and Ibn al-‘Imād (d. 1099/1687).<sup>82</sup>

Street points out that modern scholars have misunderstood Rāzī’s *Testament*. He argues that several scholars interpret the document to mean that Rāzī, on his deathbed, repented of his devotion to the rational sciences. Van Ess argues that the *Testament* indicates Rāzī’s disappointment and dissatisfaction with theology, and that it signals a turnabout in his religiosity. He contends that Rāzī’s relationship with theology ended in a great disillusion (*Ernüchterung*), and that Rāzī later returned to “the simple truths of the Qur’ān, which the theoretical science of theology could not replace.”<sup>83</sup> Kholeif comes to similar conclusions about the *Testament*. He interprets the document to mean that Rāzī expressed remorse for having used the rational sciences, and that he turned away from them on his deathbed to take refuge in scripture.<sup>84</sup> In all of these interpretations of the *Testament* Rāzī fits cozily into a recurrent theme in the history of theology. Like others before him, including Juwaynī, he ends up finding only idle talk in theology. On his deathbed, he turns away from it in contempt by repudiating his rationalistic works.

Let me proceed by quoting the parts of the *Testament* that relate directly to the claims that Rāzī makes about the role of reason in his system of thought.<sup>85</sup>

Know that I was a lover of knowledge, and that I wrote something about every question, that I might come to know about its quantity and quality, regardless of whether it was true or false, but I exempted from this process that which I saw in the books I held in esteem, that this sensible world is under the direction of a Director who transcends any likeness to space-occupying entities and accidents, who is to be described as omnipotent, omniscient, and merciful. I tried the methods of the *kalām* and philosophy, and I did not find in them the profit

82. Street, “Concerning the Life and Works of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī,” 135–146.

83. Van Ess, *Die Erkenntnislehre*, 32.

84. Kholeif, *A Study on Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī and His Controversies in Transoxiana*, 21.

85. I mainly follow Street’s translation. He quotes the earliest version of the complete document, which appears in Ibn Abī Uṣaybi‘ah’s *Uyūn* 2:27–28. See Street, “Concerning the Life and Works of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī,” 136–137.

which I found in the great Qurʾān, for the Qurʾān ascribes all greatness and glory to God, and prevents preoccupation with objections and contradictions. These serve only to teach us that the human intellect comes to nothing and fades away in these treacherous defiles and hidden ways.

So I hold all that is confirmed by obvious indications concerning the necessity of God's existence, His oneness, and His having no partner, either in all eternity, or in control or effective agency. This is what I shall hold, and shall take before God. As for those things which culminate in minute discussions and obscurity: everything which is found in the Qurʾān and in the sound traditions which are agreed upon by trustworthy leaders of the faith as having one meaning, these things are as they are.

As for the academic works I wrote, in which I multiplied the posing of questions on those matters considered by the ancients, if someone looks at them and finds something pleasing, let him remember me in his pious prayers and ask blessings for me. If he does not find anything pleasing in my books, let him forgo wicked words about me. I only intended to increase research and sharpen the mind, relying in all things on God.

In his study of the *Testament* Street illustrates that Rāzī's proponents and opponents diverge when they interpret Rāzī's self-reflective remarks. On the basis of evidence from the bio-bibliographical tradition, including Ṣafadī's *Wāfi*, Street argues that the *Testament* is not necessarily a repentance that testifies to Rāzī's repudiation of his rationalistic works. Rather, the *Testament* is a document that shows "the soundness of [Rāzī's] belief" and "what he hoped for regarding his writings," namely that they would continue to be read and studied. He also notes that the document contains vocabulary and ideas that reflect Rāzī's commitment to the Ashʿarite tradition. For instance, Rāzī's assertion that God does not have any likeness to space-occupying things and accidents reflects Ashʿarite technical terminology. Furthermore, the idea that the rational proofs are found in the Qurʾān and Sunna is typical of Ashʿarism.<sup>86</sup>

86. Street, "The Life and Works of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī," 138. On the rationalistic methodology of Ashʿarī's works, see Frank, "Al-Ashʿarī's conception of the nature and role of speculative reasoning in theology," 136–154.

Rāzī's traditionalist opponents promoted an alternative interpretation of his *Testament*. In contrast to Street's reading, which is influenced by the Ash'arite tradition, they propose that Rāzī disowned his works of rationalism after pouring his confidence in the rationalistic methods of philosophy (*fal-safa*) and theology (*kalam*). This interpretation is evinced in Ibn Taymiyya's rendition of the *Testament*. In his *Risāla al-Furqān* Ibn Taymiyya writes:

Rāzī acknowledged at the end of his life that the method of the philosophers and the theologians neither cured illness nor quenched thirst. He said: "I have contemplated the methods of the *kalām* and philosophy, but I found them neither to cure illness nor quench thirst; I found the closest path that of the Qur'ān."<sup>87</sup>

Ibn Taymiyya also quotes this part of the *Testament* in *Jahd al-Qariha*, in which he cites Rāzī *Aqsām al-Ladhdhat*. Quoting Rāzī, Ibn Taymiyya states:

I have contemplated the theological schools and philosophical methods, but I found them incapable of healing the soul or quenching the thirst. I found the best paths to be that of the Qur'ān; it is more explicit in affirmation—"The Beneficent, who is established on the Throne"; "Unto Him good words ascent"—and more explicit in negation—"Like Him there is naught"; "They cannot compass it in knowledge." He who has had my experience would know what I know.<sup>88</sup>

Ibn Taymiyya's rendition of the *Testament* supposes a dichotomy between the use of rationalistic methods and the adherence to the Qur'ān and the prophetic Sunna. Such a contrariety reflects Ibn Taymiyya's Traditionalist way of thinking, which dichotomizes reason and scripture. In his view, knowledge that is derived from the human intellect is secular; knowledge derived from the Qur'ān and prophetic traditions is religious.<sup>89</sup> The possibility that these disparate sources of knowledge can function interdependently, as I have

87. Street, "The Life and Works of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī," 138.

88. Cited in Hallaq, *Ibn Taymiyya Against The Greek Logicians*, 149. A similar statement appears in Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmū'a al-Fatāwa*, 13:141. Yet another statement is quoted by Ibn al-Imād (Street, "The Life and Works," 140). On Rāzī's *Risālat Dhamm ladhdhāt al-dunya*, see the edition (211–265) and study (155–203) by Shihadeh in *The Teleological Ethics of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī*.

89. Ibn Taymiyya, *Against the Greek Logicians*, 150.

explained that they do for Rāzī, is foreign to Ibn Taymiyya's Traditionalist methodology.

Ibn Taymiyya explains the claims that Rāzī makes about himself through the lens of Traditionalism, albeit a peculiar iteration of it that is not necessarily representative of early Traditionalism. His Traditionalist mode of thought prejudices his evaluation of the claims that Rāzī makes about his religiosity and his methods of research.

He reinterprets the *Testament* to mean that Rāzī abandoned the use of reason for the way of the Qur'ān and the prophetic Sunna; he implies that Rāzī renounced the rationalistic methods he had used in *kalām* and *falsafa* in favor of the pious course of the Qur'ān and Sunna by repudiating his rationalistic works on his deathbed. I do not know whether Ibn Taymiyya intentionally misconstrues Rāzī's remarks here, as Street suggests that he does.<sup>90</sup> He certainly does imply, however, that Rāzī found more satisfaction in the Qur'ān's method than he did in the logical and dialectical methods of *kalām* and *falsafa*. He also implies that Rāzī considered the application of rationalistic methods incompatible with adherence to the Qur'ān and Sunna.

As we have demonstrated in our analysis of the Throne Verse Rāzī considered the rationalistic method perfectly compatible with the methodological course of the Qur'ān and Sunna. The idea that one must make an unavoidable choice between two alternatives—the use of rationalistic methods and adherence to the Qur'ān and prophetic Sunna—is absent from the internal design of Rāzī's methodology. Only if one assumes that the application of rationalistic methods to the Qur'ān and Sunna is incompatible with adherence to these sources can Ibn Taymiyya's rendition of Rāzī's *Testament* be considered accurate.

Although Ibn Taymiyya was unfairly prejudiced against Rāzī and judged him from the outside perspective of Traditionalism, he nonetheless perspicaciously discerned the core principles of Rāzī's *ta'wīl* methodology as well as their implications. Scholars have come to recognize that within the sweep of the Islamic intellectual tradition, Ibn Taymiyya's *Dar'* is without question one of the greatest resources for understanding Rāzī's system of thought. By examining Ibn Taymiyya's exposition and refutation of Rāzī's *ta'wīl* I hope

90. Street, "The Life and Works of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī," 139.

to show how he inverted Rāzī's argument for allegorical exegesis and why it posed such a threat to Traditionalism.

In his introduction to the *Dar*,<sup>91</sup> Ibn Taymiyya singles out Rāzī and the modern Sunnī theologians—the *muta'akhhkirūn*—as the primary targets of his refutation. He identifies Rāzī as the ringleader among the “modern” *mutakallimūn* who set *kalām* and *tafsir* methodology on rationalistic foundations. In the following selection Ibn Taymiyya points to some of the ways that Rāzī did this. He writes:

We have already expounded upon the position of those who claim that inferences that are based on scriptural evidence (*al-istidlāl bi-l-adilla al-sam'iyya*) are contingent upon premises that are only probable (*ẓaniyya*), including the transmission of words, syntax, and inflection; the absence of metaphor, ellipses, and specification, the shared meanings of words and their transmission, and the rationalist objection to scripture. We composed a work thirty years ago in which we exposed the falsity of that position. And we partially explained its falsity in our discussion on the *Muḥaṣṣal*, as well as in other places.

In that discussion we confirmed scriptural evidence and we explained that it conveys certainty and decisive knowledge. The aim of our discussion in this work is to elucidate why the rationalist objection to scripture (*al-mu'ārid al-'aqli*) is to be rejected and to expose the falsity of the position of those who give absolute priority to rational evidence over scripture (*taqdīm al-adilla al-'aqliyya muḥlaqan*).<sup>92</sup>

In the above selections Ibn Taymiyya discloses that his chief objective is to expose the falsity of the rationalistic principles that govern Rāzī's methodology.<sup>92</sup> He identifies the core principles of Rāzī's methodology, and he calls attention to several ways that they challenge the preeminent authority of the Qur'ān and prophetic Sunna. He recognizes that by authorizing the rationalist objection to scripture, Rāzī subordinated the Qur'ān and prophetic Sunna (*naql*) to reason. In his view, this principle effectively devalued the preeminent sources of traditional knowledge, since it implied that the Qur'ān and

91. Ibn Taymiyya, *Dar* al-ta'āruḍ al-'aql wa-l-naql, 1:22.

92. That this is Ibn Taymiyya's chief aim in volume one of the *Dar* is pointed out by El Omari in “Ibn Taymiyya's ‘Theology of the Sunna’ and his Polemics with the Ash'arites,” 101 and 107.

prophetic Sunna, in contrast to the human intellect, fail to convey certain or decisive knowledge.

For our purposes, however, what is important is that Ibn Taymiyya discerned how Rāzī's interpretive method is informed by his rationalistic principles. Ibn Taymiyya draws this connection when he outlines the aims of the *Dar'*. He writes:

Because the evidence of what the prophet intended—may prayers and peace be upon him—concerning these issues is effected only by countering the rationalist objection and by showing that it is impossible to give priority to the rationalist objection over scripture (lit. the texts that have been brought by the prophets), we intend to demonstrate the incorrectness of that unsound rule through which people were diverted from God's path and kept from understanding what the prophet meant and that he was truthful in what he reported (*wa-taṣḍīqihī fīmā akhbāra*). This is because whatever argument one makes (that elucidates what the prophet meant) has no efficacy (*la yanfa'*) if one postulates that the rationalist objection opposes it. Indeed, this leads to an impugnment of the prophet and an impugnment of whomever makes inferences on the basis of his speech.<sup>93</sup>

Rāzī and his followers established this doctrine as a general rule (*qānūn*) that governs what is permissible and impermissible to infer from God's books and the discourse of the prophets. It was for this reason that they rejected what the prophets and messengers mentioned about God's attributes as well as other issues. They thought that reason opposed these things. Some of them amplified this by claiming that the textual evidence of the religious tradition does not convey certain knowledge.<sup>94</sup>

What is significant about Ibn Taymiyya's remarks is that they construe Rāzī's methodological program in such a way that it constitutes a challenge to the authority of the prophet and scripture.<sup>95</sup> Chiefly, Ibn Taymiyya argues that by devising specific principles, namely the rationalist objection to scripture

93. Ibn Taymiyya, *Dar' ta'āruḍ al-'aql wa-l-naql*, 1:20–21.

94. Ibn Taymiyya, *Dar' ta'āruḍ al-'aql wa-l-naql*, 1:4.

95. This is a strategy Ibn Taymiyya employs in his other works. See Michot, "A Mamlūk Theologian's Commentary on Avicenna's *Risāla Adḥawiyya*. Being a Translation of a Part of the *Dar' al-Ta'āruḍ* of Ibn Taymiyya, with Introduction, Annotation, and Appendices," 149–203.

and the priority of reason over scripture, Rāzī rejected the prophetic Sunna.<sup>96</sup> Ibn Taymiyya thus recognized the impact of Rāzī's rule of *ta'wīl*: When the human intellect brings forward decisive evidence, reason has the strength to overturn scripture's apparent sense and its equally decisive evidence. He implies that this rule of *ta'wīl* led Rāzī to dismiss the totality of knowledge that the prophet related as an inferior methodological source.

The aforementioned selection also provides a classic example of how Ibn Taymiyya, using a Traditionalist lens of piety, skillfully moves Rāzī's methodology into the category of heresy. Ibn Taymiyya's strategy here is premised on the notion that the prophet and pious ancestors did not sanction the application of reason to the Qur'ān and prophetic traditions, and that it is not permissible to place human reasoning in the service of the canonical sources.

To accomplish this task, Ibn Taymiyya uncovers (what he considers) the real impact of Rāzī's rationalistic principles. He argues that if one postulates that human reasoning, when it assembles a counter-objection to scripture's apparent sense, has the force to counter the meaning conveyed by scripture, then it follows that reason can render scripture ineffective as a source of knowledge. Thus, in the aforementioned excerpt, he states that "whatever argument one establishes that elucidates what the prophet meant has no efficacy if it is supposed that the rationalist objection opposes it." What he means to imply here is that the assertions expressed by the Qur'ān and prophetic traditions can be *overturned* by human reasoning. Moreover, if they can be overturned by human reasoning, then they are valid only insofar as they do not conflict with reason. Ibn Taymiyya concludes that to accede to Rāzī's rationalistic principles is to impugn the prophet's credibility as a source of knowledge. Thus, he states that if one were to recognize Rāzī's rationalistic principles as legitimate, then the "truthfulness of what the prophet reported" would be undermined.



Ibn Taymiyya came up with additional strategies to counter the new system of methods that Rāzī established for Sunnī theology. One of these strategies was to confront Rāzī on his own grounds by exposing the internal inconsistencies of his theory of *ta'wīl*. Scholars have already noted that Ibn Taymiyya

96. For further discussion on Ibn Taymiyya's conception of the Sunna, see El Omari, "Ibn Taymiyya's 'Theology of the Sunna' and his Polemics with the Ash'arites," 101–119.

had an aptitude for discerning logical flaws and for undermining metaphysical systems that assume Aristotelian logic. Hallaq (1993) has shown that Ibn Taymiyya isolated the fundamental assumptions of Greek and Arabic logic and subsequently demolished the principles of its system. In so doing, he illustrates the internal consistencies of Greek and Arabic logic and undermines the basis of Islamic metaphysics that was grounded on this system.<sup>97</sup> More recently, Michot (2003) cites several instances in which Ibn Taymiyya uses this strategy to refute Avicenna's view on the afterlife.<sup>98</sup>

To describe how Ibn Taymiyya disassembles and then undermines Rāzī's theory of *ta'wīl*, I begin by recapitulating the steps of Rāzī's *ta'wīl* theory. His argument for the priority of reason over scripture may be reduced to the following steps:

1. Scripture's veracity is proved through rational means.
2. Scripture cannot be used as a counterargument against reason.
3. Priority must be given to reason when these two sources conflict.

Ibn Taymiyya confronts Rāzī on his own terms by turning his own argument against him. By doing so, he intends to show that the new methodology that Rāzī established for the Sunnī tradition is logically flawed and hence internally inconsistent, aspiring to direct his reader to the alternative of Traditionalism.<sup>99</sup>

Ibn Taymiyya accepts the truth of the first proposition and then demonstrates the impossibility of the second. After showing the falsity of proposition (2), he suggests an alternative, which is that scripture must be given priority over reason when these two sources of knowledge oppose one another. His key responses to Rāzī's argument are as follows:

- (a) Let their argument be refuted with an argument similar to the one they hold: If there is a conflict between reason and scripture, then scripture must

97. Hallaq, *Against the Greek Logicians*, xi–lii.

98. Michot, "A Mamlūk Theologian's Commentary," 162.

99. The complexity of Ibn Taymiyya's theology is explored by Özervarli, who argues that Ibn Taymiyya (unlike early Islamic traditionalists) sought to "present an alternative theology based on the Qur'ān and Sunna while engaging with the discourse of philosophical theology" (80).



be given priority. This is because by accepting the evidence of both reason and scripture one violates the principle of contradiction, and by rejecting both one violates the principle of excluded middle. To give priority to reason is impossible because it is reason that has proved the truth of scripture and made it necessary to accede to what the prophet has related. If we were to deny scripture, we would thereby deny rational evidence. And, if we were to deny the evidence of reason, it could not then serve as a counter-argument to scripture, since what does not qualify as evidence cannot be used to refute anything. Thus, to give priority to reason requires that it not be given priority, and so to give it priority is impossible.<sup>100</sup>

- (b) It is reason that has proven scripture's truth and validity and that its report conforms to what it reports about. Thus, if it is possible for rational evidence to be false because of the falsity of scripture, then it follows that reason is not a valid form of evidence, and that, if it is not a valid form of evidence, it should not be heeded at all, let alone be given priority. Thus, giving priority to reason over scripture entails the impugnement of reason because of its denial of what reason implies and is supposed to prove. Therefore, if giving priority to reason over scripture entails the impugnement of reason, and the impugnement of reason prevents its use as evidence, and its impugnement as evidence impugns its use as a counter-argument, then giving it priority when it is a counter-argument negates its being a counter-argument. Consequently, to give it priority over scripture is impossible, and that is what I set out to prove.<sup>101</sup>

In the aforementioned excerpts Ibn Taymiyya directs his argument against the second proposition of Rāzī's claim, which is that scripture cannot be used as a counterargument against reason. The gist of his argument is that one cannot claim both that (i) reason proves the veracity of scripture and (ii) that reason proves scripture false when it comes into conflict with it.

Ibn Taymiyya proposes that if reason is the source of scripture, by which he means the methodological source through which we know that the content of revelation is true, then it cannot be used as a counterargument against scripture when these two sources oppose one another. What he means by this can be illustrated with an example of the *mutashābihāt*—the ambiguous

100. Ibn Taymiyya, *Dar' ta'ārud al-'aql wa-l-naql*, 1:170.

101. Ibn Taymiyya, *Dar' ta'ārud al-'aql wa-l-naql*, 1:170–171; trans. Heer, "The Priority of Reason," 101.

verses of the Qur'ān and prophetic traditions. In his view, one cannot use the decisive evidence reached by the human intellect, namely that God is transcendent above direction, in order to show the falsity of scripture's apparent sense, which is that God is in a direction, namely "being above" (*fawqīyya*). This is because to do so would demand that one affirm *and* deny the veracity of scripture's apparent sense, which is a logical impossibility. Thus, according to Rāzī's reasoning, scripture's apparent sense can be affirmed as true because its credibility is vouched for by reason. But to use the decisive evidence of reason to counter this demands that the truth of this be rejected by the conclusions reached by reason. So, if one were to deny scripture's apparent sense, one would undermine the credibility of human reasoning, which has given scripture its credibility as a source of knowledge by proving it to be true.<sup>102</sup>

What is noteworthy about Ibn Taymiyya's argument is that it skillfully inverts Rāzī's theory of *ta'wīl*. By demonstrating that reason undermines itself as a valid form of evidence within Rāzī's methodology, he shows that reason's authority can be called into question. Furthermore, if reason as a methodological source of knowledge is doubtful, then one should not heed reason when it opposes scriptural evidence. On the contrary, it is necessary to heed scriptural authority by giving it priority even when reason opposes it. The point that Ibn Taymiyya wishes his reader to take from his polemic is that Rāzī's rationalistic enterprise, when examined on its own terms, is insubstantial and failed to produce its desired result—a methodology solidly grounded in human reasoning.

The selections that we have examined from the *Dar'* indicate that Ibn Taymiyya aimed to demolish a foundational element of Rāzī's methodology, to wit his theory of *ta'wīl*. By exposing the inconsistency in Rāzī's reasoning (and specifically, by showing how reason undermines its own credibility within Rāzī's methodology), Ibn Taymiyya strived to direct his readers away from Rāzī's rationalistic program and toward a Traditionalist view that acknowledges the Qur'ān and prophetic traditions as the preeminent sources of knowledge.

The weaknesses in Rāzī's methodology, which Ibn Taymiyya discerns in his polemic, indicate that Rāzī did not fully work out a logical, consistent

102. This step of Ibn Taymiyya's argument was first deciphered by Heer in *The Priority of Reason*. Özervarli (85–86) follows Heer on this issue.

explanation of how reason should govern the interpretation of scripture. Although it is true that Rāzī did not resolve all aspects of his rationalistic methodology, it is also true that his theory of interpretation and his practices of *taʾwīl* are more complex and varied than Ibn Taymiyya admits in his polemic. To gain a more comprehensive understanding of Rāzī's theories of Qur'ānic interpretation it will be valuable to examine his various practices of *taʾwīl*. In the following two chapters I dip into the vast depository of Rāzī's Qur'ān commentary (as well as selections from his works of theology and philosophy) to accomplish this task.

## CHAPTER FOUR

# INTERPRETING THE INTELLECT AND LIGHT



In this chapter I analyze the way that Rāzī systematized methods and ideas from Avicennian philosophy into his Qur’ān commentary. I focus on his theory of the intellect and epistemology, which he expatiates on when he interprets the Light Verse (24, 35). I argue that Rāzī initially picked up the thread of philosophical exegesis (and the ideas that are knotted to it) by commenting on Avicenna’s *Ishārāt*, and that he subsequently wove this thread into the fabric of *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*. By describing how Rāzī transfers Avicennian methods and ideas across disciplinary boundaries—from *falsafa* into Sunnī *tafsīr*—I illustrate the way that Rāzī appropriated Avicennian philosophy and subsequently naturalized it into Sunnī exegesis. By doing so, I highlight how Avicenna’s allegorical methods and ideas came to be considered authoritative within the genre of Sunnī *tafsīr*.

In this chapter I also argue that Rāzī continues the inspired rational approach of Ghazālī’s *Mishkāt al-anwār* when he comments on the Light Verse in *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*. By juxtaposing key passages from these texts (as well as Rāzī’s remarks on light in *Lawāmi‘ al-bayyināt*), I illustrate that Rāzī assimilates Ghazālī’s paradoxical theory of light and his interpretation of Qur’ānic symbols into Sunnī *tafsīr*. Finally, I propose that Rāzī adopts

methods and principles characteristic of classical Ṣūfism when he interprets the Light Verse in yet a third work, namely *Asrār al-tanzīl wa-anwār al-tāwīl*. By dissecting the way that Rāzī interprets Qurʾānic symbols in this text, I show that despite his rationalistic tendencies Rāzī also embraces methods that invoke the authority of divine inspiration.

By analyzing how Rāzī approaches the Light Verse from several directions (the philosophical or rationalistic, the theological, and the inspirational), I show how the eclecticism of his methodology pulled his system of thought (including its epistemic schemes and metaphysical ideas) in various directions. I also show that rather than borrow methods and ideas passively and then reiterate them, Rāzī augmented and refined the threads of exegesis that he picked up, and he developed and reinterpreted the ideas that were knotted to them. I conclude that Rāzī, rather than binding himself to a particular methodology (e.g., the Avicennian or Ghazālīan), and rather than reconciling these methodologies, sought to give them canonical authority by introducing them into Sunnī *tafsīr*.



I begin by noting that Rāzī inherits several elemental ideas about the Qurʾān's parables from his predecessors in the *tafsīr* tradition. Chief among these is the notion that the Qurʾān's parables are modes of instruction that rely on symbols, and that such symbols conceal the Qurʾān's teachings. When exegetes interpret the Qurʾān's parables, they employ an array of methods that substitute alternative meanings for the plain sense of the Qurʾān's symbols. Rāzī's predecessors also assert that a Qurʾānic parable can be understood only by applying human reasoning (*ʿaql*) to its sensorial symbols. Even Traditionalist commentators who devalue reason as a source of knowledge and as an exegetical instrument acknowledge that the symbols of the Qurʾān's parables must be diverted from their plain sense in order to be understood.<sup>1</sup>

Muslim commentators often sanctify these ideas by extracting them from the Qurʾān. The *locus classicus* for this subject is the Qurʾānic expression “[a]nd those parables (*amthāl*)—We strike them for the people, but none understands them save those who know” (29, 43).<sup>2</sup> Let me cite two examples

1. This point is emphasized by Wansbrough in *Qurʾānic Studies*, 240.

2. Trans. Arberry. This Qurʾānic expression appears in the context of a parable about a spider's house, and it initiated discussions about likening and comparisons in the Qurʾān.

that illustrate this point. Māturīdī (d. 333/944) interprets this verse to mean that the parables conceal ideas that are not easily accessible to laypersons, and he implies that only the learned—“those endowed with knowledge”—understand the meaning of the parables. Furthermore, he views parables as modes of instruction that “facilitate the understanding of what is remote from the imagination” and “unveil things that are hidden from the understanding.”<sup>3</sup>

Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144) derives similar ideas from Qurʾān 29, 43. He restricts the true meaning of the parables to those who wield human reasoning as an exegetical instrument. He asserts that only the learned (*al-ʿālimūn*) understand the “truth and perfection of the parables” and what the parables “really mean to convey.” When he elaborates on this idea, he states that the Qurʾān’s parables (*amthāl*) contain “hidden meanings that are veiled before they are disclosed by the understanding,” i.e., human reasoning.<sup>4</sup>

Rāzī assumes the above ideas from the *tafsīr* tradition when he interprets the Qurʾān’s parables. When he comments on the Qurʾānic phrase “but none understands [the parables] save those who know” (29, 43), he implies that the true meaning of the parables (“what the parables really mean to convey”) can be understood only by select intellectuals whom he refers to as the learned (*al-ʿālimūn*). He defines this group as “those who have attained knowledge by rejecting all but God” and who have realized that “serving what is other than God is futile.”<sup>5</sup> Following his predecessors in the *tafsīr* tradition, Rāzī appeals to Qurʾān 29, 43 as a means of validating intellect as a divinely sanctioned tool of interpretation.<sup>6</sup>

#### 4.1 RĀZĪ’S APPROPRIATION OF AVICENNA’S PHILOSOPHICAL EXEGESIS

In the following section I describe the process through which Rāzī transfers Avicenna’s thread of exegesis (and the philosophical ideas that are knotted to it) into Sunnī *tafsīr*. To accomplish this task I juxtapose the occasions on which Rāzī elaborates on Avicenna’s interpretation of the Light Verse. I am

3. Māturīdī, *Taʾwīlāt ahl al-sunna*, 4:20.

4. Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kashshāfʿan ḥaqāʾiq al-tanzīl*, 3:206–207.

5. Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 25:70.

6. Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 25:69ff.

not aware of any study that methodically compares Rāzī's discussions in *Sharḥ al-ishārāt* and *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* or that charts the course that he took to assimilate Avicenna's method of exegesis into the canon of Sunnī *tafsīr*.<sup>7</sup>

In Arberry's translation of the Qur'ān, the Light Verse reads as follows:

God is the Light of the heavens and the earth;  
The likeness of His Light is as a niche  
Wherein is a lamp  
(the lamp in a glass,  
the glass as it were a glittering star)  
kindled from a Blessed Tree,  
an olive that is neither of the East nor of the West  
whose oil well nigh would shine, even if no fire touched it;  
Light upon Light;  
(God guides to His Light whom He will.)  
(And God strikes similitudes for men,  
and God has knowledge of everything

In recent scholarship Janssens points out that Avicenna commented on the Light Verse on three occasions. He shows that Avicenna allegorizes this Qur'ānic parable in *Fī ithbāt al-nubuwwāt*, *Al-Ishārāt wa-l-tanbihāt*, and in yet a third treatise that has been edited by 'Āṣī. Janssens establishes that Avicenna's acclaimed theory of intuition is present only in the version of the Light Verse that Avicenna develops in *Ishārāt*.<sup>8</sup> Other recent scholarship on Avicenna points out that Rāzī belonged to a select group of philosophical commentators on the *Ishārāt*.<sup>9</sup> In his article that documents how Avicennian philosophy

7. Avicenna's interpretation of the Light Verse is summarized by Hajjaji-Jarrah in "*Āyat al-Nūr*: A Metaphor for Where We Come From, What We Are, and Where We Are Going," 174–175.

8. Janssens also establishes that Avicenna's interpretation of the Qur'ānic symbols in the treatise edited by 'Āṣī "lacks philosophical undertones." See Janssens, "Avicenna and the Qur'ān: A Survey of his Qur'ānic Commentaries," 177–192. On Avicenna's *Ishārāt*, see "Eṣārāt wa'l-tanbihāt, Al-" in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, 8: 563–564 (M. E. Marmura). On Avicenna's symbolic exegesis in his philosophical stories, see Sarah Stroumsa, "Avicenna's Philosophical Stories: Aristotle's *Poetics* Reinterpreted," 183–206.

9. Endress, "Reading Avicenna in the Madrasa: Intellectual Genealogies and Chains of Transmission of Philosophy and the Sciences in the Islamic East," 410–415. Selections from

became integrated into Muslim institutions of education, Gerhard Endress identifies Rāzī as a link in a chain of commentators on the *Ishārāt*. Recent scholarship lists Rāzī within a chain of authorities that begins with Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm Ibn al-Akfānī (d. 749/1348) and ends with Abū-l Ḥasan Bahmanyār, one of Avicenna's disciples.<sup>10</sup>

In his masterful commentary on Avicenna's *Ishārāt*, Rāzī discerns that for Avicenna, the Light Verse is a model that explains how the rational soul acquires theoretical knowledge. He also grasps that intuition (*ḥads*) is the cornerstone of Avicenna's theory of intellect, and he explicates the correlations between this philosophical idea and the symbols of the Light Verse.<sup>11</sup> In order to discern the course that Rāzī takes to integrate key Avicennian elements into Sunnī *tafsīr*, I now analyze his exegesis of Avicenna's interpretation of the Qur'ānic symbols expressed in the Light Verse.

## i. The Symbolism of the Niche

### *Sharḥ al-ishārāt*:

We hold that [Avicenna's interpretation of the Light Verse] alludes to the soul's intellectual faculties with respect to their ranks (*marātib*) in perfection (*istikmāl*). These ranks can be divided into that whose being may be considered perfect in potential and into that whose being may be considered perfect in actuality.

Rāzī's commentary on Avicenna's *Ishārāt* have recently been translated by Wisnovsky in *An Anthology of Philosophy in Persia*, 3: 189–202 (not seen).

10. The *silsilah* in which Rāzī appears is listed by Shihadeh in *The Teleological Ethics* (153–154); Wisnovsky, "Avicennism and Exegetical Practice in the Early Commentaries on the *Ishārāt*," 352; Endress, "Reading Avicenna in the Madrasa," 371–422. It should also be noted that Rāzī's commentary on Avicenna's *Ishārāt*, as already shown by Gutas, was just one of several texts from the Ash'arī/Shāfī'ī tradition that critiqued the Avicennian philosophical system. Gutas mentions that after Rāzī, Āmidī (1233) and Tūsī came to Avicenna's defense and wrote commentaries on the *Ishārāt*; the latter were adjudications that attempted to mediate between the two adversarial positions. See Gutas, "The Heritage of Avicenna," 88–89. Shihadeh dates Rāzī's commentary on Avicenna's *Ishārāt* to ca. 580/1184 (Shihadeh, *The Teleological Ethics*, 9).

On Bahmanyār, see "Bahmanyār, Kīā" in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, 3: 501–503 (H. Daiber).

11. That intuition is the cornerstone of Avicenna's noetic theory has been pointed out most recently by Treiger in *Inspired Knowledge in Islamic Thought*, 76. On intuition in Avicenna's philosophy, see Gutas, *Intuition and Thinking*, 1–38; Rahman, *Avicenna's Psychology*, 35–37.



A power also varies with respect to strength and weakness. For, at its inception, just as the capacity to write belongs to a child, at its intermediary [rank], it is as an illiterate person who has the readiness to learn. At its final rank, it is just as one who is capable of writing but is not (actually) writing, although he can write when he wishes. Thus, the faculty of the intellect in relation to the first rank is called the **material intellect**. At that time its relation to it is primary material which is devoid of all the forms that it is ready to receive them. And it is present in all individuals of the (human) species in the principles in their original creation (*fiṭra*) [. . .] so, the material intellect is a likeness for the **niche** because in itself it is dark and receptive of light, although not equivalent to it.<sup>12</sup>

*Mafātīḥ al-ghayb:*

He [Avicenna] reduced (*nazzala*) these five symbols to the degrees (*marātib*) of the human soul's perceptions. He claimed that there is no doubt that the human soul is receptive of universal concepts (*li-l ma'ārif al-kulliyya*) and of perceptions that are separate from matter, and [he claimed that] in its initial state, the soul is empty of all knowledge, so at that time it is called the **material intellect**, and this is the **niche**.<sup>13</sup>

When he comments on Avicenna's *Ishārāt*, Rāzī abides by the former's format, and he interprets the Light Verse when he discusses the soul's faculties.<sup>14</sup> Following Avicenna, he maintains that the rational soul is endowed with a practical intellect and theoretical intellect. The practical intellect is the power that it possesses in accordance with its need to manage (*mudabbir*) the body. It discovers, with the assistance of the theoretical power, principles that are necessary for voluntary action.<sup>15</sup> The theoretical intellect is the power

12. Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-ishārāt*, 154–155. Tūsī's commentary on this passage (which is published on page 153 of the same text) reads as follows: "The theoretical faculty is the power which the rational soul's substance needs in order to become an intellect in act. This faculty has four ranks (*marātib*). The first is its readiness to receive intellectual forms—in that condition the form is not realized, as in the case of the souls of infants. This rank is called the **material intellect**, and it is the **niche**."

13. Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 23.234.

14. Morrison (*Islam and Science*, 144–145) shows that scientific Qur'ānic exegetes including Nizām al-Dīn al-Nisābūrī (d. 728/1328) also adopted Avicenna's interpretation of the Light Verse. Following Rāzī, Nisābūrī employed philosophical vocabulary and ideas to describe the soul's intellectual development.

15. Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-ishārāt*, 154.

that it possesses in accordance with its need to perfect its substance as an intellect in actuality.<sup>16</sup>

In the above selections Rāzī explains how the Light Verse serves as a model for the rational soul's intellectual development. Each item of the Light Verse corresponds to a stage of the rational soul's development. Rāzī proposes that the Qur'ānic symbol of the niche corresponds to the material intellect, which is the intellect's potential to receive primary intelligibles—the basic building blocks of knowledge. He rationalizes this correlation by proposing that the niche and the material intellect share a characteristic that makes the former and the latter suitable referents for one another. Just as the niche is predisposed to receive light because its walls are close together, the material intellect's nature predisposes it to receive primary intelligibles. The niche is analogous to the material intellect because the two are endowed with a predisposition; the niche has the potential to receive light, and the material intellect has the potential to receive universal concepts.

## ii. The Symbolism of the Tree, Oil, and Glass

*Sharḥ al-ishārāt:*

The **glass** is a likeness for the intellect *in habitu* because it is transparent in itself and receptive of light according to the most perfect reception.<sup>17</sup> The **olive tree** is a likeness for **thinking** (*fikra*) on account of its inclination, because in itself it becomes receptive of light, however, only after much movement [on the part of the soul] and hardship. The **oil** is a likeness for **intuition** (*ḥads*), due to its being more proper to that than the olive tree. The Qur'ānic phrase, **whose oil well nigh would shine, even if no fire touched it**, is a likeness for the sacred intellect (*al-quwwa al-qudsiyya*), because it comes close to reaching a point where it intellects in act, even without something moving it from potentiality to actuality. **Light upon light** refers to the **acquired intellect**. This is because the forms that are intellectured are light, and the soul's reception of them is an additional light.<sup>18</sup>

16. Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-ishārāt*, 154; Gutas, *Avicenna*, 164.

17. What Rāzī implies here is that the glass is the most perfect likeness to convey the rational soul's reception of knowledge.

18. Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-ishārāt*, 155.

In his commentary, Ṭūsī provides further details about Rāzī's interpretation of the soul's second rank:

At the second rank primary intelligibles are realized in actuality in the intellect. It is possible for the soul to acquire theoretical knowledge on account of these primary intelligibles. This rank has four divisions. Because the aptitude to move from that primary knowledge to theoretical knowledge only [occurs] with respect to effort and searching, that [rank] is called **thinking** (*fikra*), because thinking means the resolution and determination to move from what is present to call to mind; and this division is the (olive) **tree** and the **oil**. As for the second division, which is that those movements are realized without wishing or searching—that is **intuition** (*hads*). Now, this circumstance admits of increase and decrease. And whenever something admits of increase and decrease one must suppose that that thing has two utmost points and an intermediary. The lowest point of intuition is the **oil**. As for the intermediary, which is the intellect *in habitu*, it is the **glass**. As for the highest point, it is the far-reaching, noble intuitive power (*al-quwwa al-ḥadsiyya*), which is the sacred [prophetic] power. This is **whose oil well nigh would shine, even if no fire touched it**. These are the divisions of the second rank.<sup>19</sup>

*Maḥāṭib al-ghayb:*

At its second stage primary [self-evident] knowledge is realized in the intellect, and because of this knowledge it is possible for the soul to acquire further theoretical knowledge by combining concepts with one another. Now if the strength (*amkina*) of the intellect's movement is weak, then, it is the **blessed tree**; but if it is more powerful than that, then it is the **oil**. And if it is extremely powerful, then it is the **glass**, which is **as it were a glittering star**. And if it is at the utmost extremity, then it is the sacred soul that belongs to prophets, and this is **whose oil well nigh would shine even if no fire touched it**.<sup>20</sup>

In the above excerpt Rāzī (and later Ṭūsī) elaborates on Avicenna's allegorical method, which correlates Qur'ānic symbols with the rational soul's stages of intellectual development. He explains that the symbols of the Light

19. Ṭūsī, *Sharḥ al-ishārāt*, 154.

20. Rāzī, *Maḥāṭib al-ghayb*, 23,234.

Verse—the tree, oil, and glass—refer to the intellect in habitu, which is the intellect's power to acquire secondary intelligibles by means of primary self-evident knowledge.<sup>21</sup> This rank of the soul's development is symbolized by the glass, since the glass and the intellect in habitu both serve as intermediaries. Just as the glass is the medium through which the light of the lamp appears, the intellect in habitu acts as an intermediary between the material and the acquired intellect; it functions as a prism through which theoretical knowledge is realized in the mind.

The intellect *in habitu* has further degrees, each of which is defined by a capacity to acquire theoretical knowledge. Following Avicenna's *Ishārāt* Rāzī also correlates these degrees to the symbols of the Light Verse. He proposes that the Qur'ānic olive tree symbolizes the intellect's activity of thinking (*fikra*), which is a function of the intellect in habitu. Following Avicenna's *Ishārāt*, Rāzī considers *thinking* the process through which the intellect searches for intelligibles or the middle terms of syllogisms. (In the above selection he describes this process as a movement of the soul and not as the soul's instantaneous discovery of knowledge.)<sup>22</sup> The Qur'ānic oil symbolizes the intellect's activity of *intuition*, which is a superior function of the intellect in habitu. He reasons that because oil has the capacity to kindle a lamp, the capacity for intuition is the apt referent for the oil.

In his commentary on Avicenna's *Ishārāt*, Rāzī interprets the Qur'ānic phrase "whose oil well nigh would shine even if no fire touched it," as a reference to the prophetic faculty. This faculty has an exceptionally powerful capacity for *intuition* that enables the intellect in habitu to attain theoretical knowledge. According to this Avicennian theory, human beings differ in their ability to attain knowledge, i.e., in their ability to grasp intelligibles and hit upon the middle terms of syllogisms. While some people grasp intelligibles and hit upon the middle terms of syllogisms quickly, others do this at a slower rate. The prophetic faculty is the intellect's capacity to do this at an exceptionally fast rate.<sup>23</sup>

21. Treiger, *Inspired Knowledge in Islamic Thought*, 77; Gutas, *Avicenna*, 164.

22. For a discussion on the complex subject in Avicenna's thought, see Gutas, "Intuition and Thinking," *passim*. Rāzī does discuss the relationship between intuition and thinking in *Sharḥ al-ishārāt*, and those passages deserve to be translated and compared with Avicenna's theories that have been analyzed by Gutas in "Intuition and Thinking."

23. This point is made most recently by Treiger in *Inspired Knowledge*, 74–78.

There is further evidence that Rāzī endorses Avicenna's theory of intuition. Such evidence can be found in *al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya*, a philosophical text that Rāzī composed in his early career (ca. 1180). In a discussion that affirms the existence of the sacred prophetic faculty (*fī ithbāt al-quwwa al-qudsiyya*), Rāzī endorses Avicenna's theory of intuition. He writes:

Know that the [soul's] movement from the first principles to theoretical knowledge that can be acquired (*al-naẓariyyāt*) takes place either through the instruction (*ta'lim*) of a teacher or not. If [the soul's movement] takes place through a teacher's instruction then it either culminates in one who [becomes] self-taught or to an infinite regress [of teachers]. This is because anyone who is engaged in a particular science, and immerses himself in it, and assiduously studies it, undoubtedly derives knowledge through his own ratiocination (*min tilqā'i naḥsihī*) that which, either by small or large measure, his predecessors have not [derived].

Since we notice that the degrees of this aptitude differ in power and weakness and smallness or greatness, then it is not impossible that there exists a soul that extends to the furthest degree in power and quickness of aptitude for the apprehension of the true natures of things such that this person comprehends knowledge of things without searching or wanting. Rather his mind is given over to (*yansāqu illā*) conclusions without assiduous study; then from those conclusions [it is given over] to others such that he comprehends the ends of human quests and the end points of human degrees. That faculty is called the sacred [prophetic].

Its difference from the rest of souls lies in its quantity and quality (*bi-l kamm wa-l kayf*). As for quantity, this is due to the great number of middle terms that it calls to mind. As for quality, this is due to its quickness of movement (*asra' intiqālan*) from the first principles to the secondary matters and from premises to conclusions. It differs from the rest of these souls from another perspective, which is that the rest of these souls specify questions then (*thumma*) search for middle terms which are yielded by them. As for the prophetic souls, the middle term occurs to their mind and the mind is led from it to the conclusion sought so the perception of the middle term is prior to perception of that which is sought.<sup>24</sup>

24. Rāzī, *Al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya*, 1:473–474. I am grateful to Nicholas Heer and Ahmed al-Rahim for their comments on my translation of this passage.

The above passage has a strong Avicennian background. Indeed, many of the ideas that Rāzī presents here can be traced to Avicenna's theory of intuition, which can in turn be traced to Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics*. In the above selection Rāzī endorses the principles of Avicenna's theory of instruction (*taʿlīm*) and intuition (*hads*).<sup>25</sup> The soul obtains theoretical knowledge by moving from first principles to acquired knowledge, a process that can be accomplished through instruction or intuition. All instruction, however, is in fact intuition. Following Avicenna, Rāzī reasons that because an infinite regress of learning from teacher to student is impossible, there must necessarily be a first (theoretical) teacher who discovers knowledge intuitively (i.e., hits upon the middle terms of syllogisms spontaneously) and without relying on a teacher.<sup>26</sup>

In the *Mabāḥith* Rāzī implies that intuition (*hads*) is an aptitude that belongs to the intellect and that differs in "power and weakness" among people. That is, some people have a greater capacity for intuition than others. An extreme case of intuition (i.e., an extreme case of quickness and power to intuit intelligibles) can be found in the prophetic faculty. This faculty is distinguished by its natural disposition to reach conclusions, so that it is "given over" to them without much effort ("without wanting or trying").<sup>27</sup> To spell out the difference between the prophetic faculty and ordinary intellects, Rāzī explains that the former is distinguished by its ability to intuit both qualitatively and quantitatively. The especially strong natural ability of the prophetic faculty enables it to grasp a great number of middle terms (*akthar istiḥḍāran*) and to reach them more quickly through "quickness of movement" (*asraʿ intiqālan*). The prophetic faculty is also distinguished by a method of attaining knowledge that is the inverse of ordinary intellects. Ordinary intellects first identify a problem or question and then seek the middle term of a syllogism to solve it; the prophetic faculty realizes the middle term of a syllogism before it perceives the answer that is sought.

25. On the development of Avicenna's theory of intuition (and its epistemological nuances), see Gutas, "Intuition and Thinking," 149–198.

26. One of the sources for this argument can be found in Gutas, *Avicenna* (Text 2), 19–21. That Avicenna believes that instruction is ultimately reducible to intuition is argued by Gutas in "Intuition and Thinking," 3.

27. The reflexive signification of the seventh form here ("yansāqu illā") emphasizes the natural disposition of the soul to intuition.

My analysis provides evidence that Rāzī endorsed Avicenna's central epistemological theory of intuition in both his commentary on the *Ishārāt* and the *Mabāḥith*. Furthermore, it provides evidence that even though Rāzī drops this central Avicennian concept when he interprets the Light Verse in *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, it nonetheless underlies his interpretation of the Qur'ānic phrase "whose oil well nigh would shine, even if no fire touched it." My analysis substantiates the hypothesis that Rāzī, as a Sunnī theologian, effectively imported Aristotelian-Avicennian ideas into the canon of Sunnī *tafsīr*, and that in doing so, he adapted the Sunnī worldview to the rich heritage of Aristotelian-Avicennian philosophy.

### iii. The Symbolism of the Lamp and the Fire

*Sharḥ al-ishārāt*:

**Light upon light** refers to the **acquired intellect**. This is because the forms that are intellectured are light, and the soul's reception of them is an additional light. Avicenna likened the **intellect in act** to the **lamp** because it is luminous in itself, without needing a light that it would acquire, and he likened the active intelligence to fire because lamps are kindled from it.<sup>28</sup>

In his commentary, Ṭūsī elaborates on Rāzī's exegesis as follows:

Now, know that a **power** and a **perfection** arise in the soul after it arrives at this second rank. As for the **perfection**, it is the third rank that belongs to the theoretical intellect. It occurs when the intelligible arises for it in actuality and is observed and represented in the mind (*dhihn*). This is **light upon light**. This is called the **acquired intellect**.

The fourth rank is a faculty, and it is realized when the soul calls to mind intelligibles. The soul acquires the intelligible when it wishes instead of depending on the method of acquisition. This is the **lamp**. And this power is called the **intellect in act**. And the acquired intellect only precedes the intellect in act because the intellect in act expresses the human being's capacity to call to mind theoretical knowledge when it wishes without acquisition. It is in the category of habit

28. Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-ishārāt*, 155.

(*malaka*), and the habit arises only after activity, since the habit of writing is only realized after the activity of writing. As for the acquired intellect, it is an expression for the act. And because the act is prior to the habit it must be the case that the acquired intellect precedes the intellect in act. And, he made the **intellect in act** the final of the theoretical ranks. As for his words, “and that which he moves from *in habitu* to actuality and from material to habit,” this is the **active intelligence**, and it is the **fire**.<sup>29</sup>

*Mafātīḥ al-ghayb:*

And in the fourth rank, necessary knowledge and theoretical knowledge are realized in actuality, and in this case it is as though the possessor of that knowledge views them, and this is called the **acquired intellect**, and this is “light upon light” because the faculty is a light, and the attainment of what follows from that faculty is another light.<sup>30</sup>

Then he [Avicenna] claimed that this knowledge that come to be in human souls, only come to be from the holy substance called the **active intelligence**, and this is the manager of what is below the sphere of the moon; this is the **fire**.<sup>31</sup>

Rāzī follows Avicenna’s interpretive scheme by establishing correspondences between Qur’ānic symbols and philosophical concepts. He interprets the Qur’ānic phrase, “Light upon light,” to refer to a rank superior to the intellect in habitu (*al-ʿaql bi-l malaka*). “Light upon light” symbolizes the acquired intellect, which is the faculty’s perfection. When the intellect attains this rank, intelligibles are actually represented in the mind. “Light upon light,” which is the actual realization of light, is the appropriate symbol for this rank of the soul’s intellectual development.

29. Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-ishārāt*, 154.

30. Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 23:234.

31. Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 23:234–235; Avicenna, *Al-Ishārāt wa-l-tanbihāt* (Pointers and Reminders); French trans. Goichon, *Livre des directives et remarques*, 324–327; English trans. Gutas, *Avicenna*, 164–65; Janssens, “Avicenna and the Qur’ān,” 183ff. Janssens notes that Avicenna stresses intuition in the *Ishārāt*, presenting it as a sacred power; and that this is lacking in *On the Proof of Prophecies*; he uses this as evidence for an early dating of the latter work (184).



In his commentary on the *Ishārāt* Rāzī elucidates Avicenna's epistemic theme. He explains that the intellect in act is the highest rank of the rational soul that perfects it as a substance, since this power enables the intellective faculty to call to mind an intelligible when it wishes. Rāzī elaborates on this Avicennian idea by comparing this rank of the intellect to the practice of writing. He postulates that the *habit* of writing arises only after the act of writing. The intellect in act is the ability to call to mind an intelligible at will; it is therefore a habitual power of the intellect. This rank of the intellect can arise only after the rational soul has reached the rank of the acquired intellect in which intelligibles are realized actually in the soul—just as the *habit* of writing arises only after the act of writing.<sup>32</sup>

Rāzī elaborates on Avicenna's interpretive scheme by illustrating that the Qur'ānic expression "light upon light" symbolizes the perfection of the acquired intellect, which is the intellect in act. When the intellective faculty reaches this stage, it acquires one intelligible after another. The Qur'ānic lamp symbolizes the acquired intellect in act. This is because, just as the lamp does not acquire light but rather produces light, the intellect at this stage has already acquired intelligibles and can produce them at will.

Rāzī explains that in Avicenna's interpretive scheme, the fire symbolizes the active intelligence, an immaterial substance of the supernal realm. He discloses the characteristics that are shared by this Qur'ānic symbol and philosophical concepts. Fire kindles oil to bring about light, thereby causing light to become present. Similarly, the active intelligence moves the intellect in habitu into complete actuality by moving its theoretical knowledge from potentiality to actuality.

My comparative analysis of texts illustrates the way that Rāzī forged an intellectual outlook for Sunnism in his Qur'ān commentary. He seems to have initially absorbed the philosophical method of exegesis by commenting on Avicenna's *Ishārāt*, which is the primary means that he (as well as other post-classical theologians) engaged with Avicenna's philosophy.<sup>33</sup> When he subsequently composed his Qur'ān commentary, he evidently considered

32. Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-ishārāt*, 155.

33. That the *Ishārāt* was the primary means through which post-classical Muslim theologians engaged with Avicenna's philosophy is argued by Wisnovsky in "Avicennism and Exegetical Practice in the Early Commentaries on the *Ishārāt*," 352.

Avicenna an authority on matters of exegesis and deemed his philosophical treatment of the Light Verse worthy of being preserved within the Sunnī canon of *tafsīr*. By assimilating Avicenna's exegesis into Sunnī *tafsīr*, Rāzī brought the basic worldview of Sunnism into harmony with the rich tradition of Aristotelian-Avicennian philosophy, and he made it possible for later commentators (including Baiḍāwī and Iṣfāhānī) to draw on the ancient-Islamic philosophical tradition.

## 4.2 RĀZĪ'S RECEPTION OF GHAZĀLĪ'S INTERPRETATION OF LIGHT

We have seen that Rāzī confers authority on Avicennian philosophical ideas by integrating them into the canon of Sunnī *tafsīr*. In the following section I argue that Rāzī augments and refines Ghazālī's allegorical exegesis, and that by doing so, he gives unorthodox metaphysical ideas a place within Sunnī *tafsīr*. By comparing Ghazālī's remarks on the paradoxical nature of light with passages from Rāzī's *Lawāmi' al-bayyināt* and *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, I try to show how certain unconventional ideas were integrated into Islamic orthodoxy of Sunnism and given authority alongside those of other schools.

Pourjavady has already analyzed several divergences and parallels between Ghazālī's celebrated *Mishkāt al-anwār* and Rāzī's theological treatises (including *Āsās al-taqdīs*, *Sharḥ asmā' Allāh al-ḥusnā*, and an additional Persian treatise).<sup>34</sup> In his extensive study on Ghazālī's *Mishkāt al-anwār* Landolt has shown that when Rāzī elaborates on Ghazālī's famous "Veils-tradition" he diverges from certain aspects of his thought.<sup>35</sup> By elucidating the methodological principles and ideas that Rāzī maintains from Ghazālī, I highlight a further type of allegorical exegesis in Rāzī's thought. This variety (which sees paradoxical ideas in the concept "light") differs from Avicennian philosophical *ta'wīl* that I outlined earlier. It also differs from the rationalistic varieties of *ta'wīl* that one finds in Rāzī's own genealogical tradition of Ash'arism (and

34. Pourjavady discusses the influence of Ghazālī's *Mishkāt al-anwār* on Rāzī's Qur'ān commentary. Pourjavady, "Fahr-e Rāzī und Gazzālīs *Mishkāt al-anwār* (Lichternische)," 49–70.

35. Landolt, "Ghazālī and Religionswissenschaft," 65ff.

which Rāzī subscribes to when he interprets the Qur'ānic term *light* in *Ta'sīs al-taqdīs* and *Sharḥ asmā' Allāh al-ḥusnā*.

I begin by outlining the structure of Rāzī's excursus on the Light Verse in *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*.

- [1] On the Application of the term Light to God
  - [1.1] Refutation of the position that God is identical to solar light
  - [1.2] Discussion of various readings of the Qur'ānic expression "God is the light of the heavens and the earth"
  - [1.3] Twenty arguments that indicate the superiority of the light of the intellect over the light of the physical eye
- [2] Discussion of the famous Veils Tradition: "God has seventy veils of light and darkness. If He were to uncover them, then the glories of His face would burn everything that His vision apprehended."
- [3] Commentary on the parable of the Light Verse (*sharḥ fī kayfiyyat al-tamthīl*)
- [4] Leftovers or remaining questions tied to this verse

Rāzī draws on the tradition of Sunnī *tafsīr* to give a figurative meaning to the Qur'ānic phrase "God is the light of the heavens and the earth." His use of *ta'wīl* in section [1.2] assumes the idea that the Qur'ān has an internal conceptual unity—that the Qur'ān is internally consistent and that its constituent parts can be explained with reference to one another. Like earlier commentators, Rāzī finds support for this idea in the Qur'ānic verse "if [the Qur'ān] had been from other than God surely they would have found in it much inconsistency" (4, 82). He interprets this verse to mean that the Qur'ān lacks internal contradictions and that its unity provides evidence of Muḥammad's sincerity.<sup>36</sup>

Like his predecessors in the *tafsīr* tradition, Rāzī employs textual analogy and periphrasis, which are two classical exegetical devices, to establish figurative values for the term *light* in section [1.2].<sup>37</sup> When he analyzes the Qur'ānic phrase "God is the light of the heavens and the earth," Rāzī proposes several meanings for this. He posits that light is the cause of manifestation on the

36. Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 10:197–198.

37. For an analysis of the devices of textual analogy, periphrasis, and semantic collation, see Wansbrough, *Qur'ānic Studies*, 202–227.

grounds that it makes things perceptible. Guidance has this in common with light. Just as solar light makes it possible for things to be seen, God's guidance in turn makes possible the attainment of knowledge and good works.<sup>38</sup> Rāzī establishes the semantic equivalence of light and guidance by adducing the Qur'ānic expression "God is the Protector of the believers; He brings them forth from the darkness into the light" (2, 257). Additionally, he establishes this semantic equivalence by adducing the Qur'ānic expression "God guides to his Light whom He will" (24, 35), in which light refers to divine guidance to knowledge and right action.<sup>39</sup>

Rāzī suggests other figurative meanings for the term *light* by citing profane poetry. He employs the device of textual analogy to postulate that light can mean governance. In order to establish this semantic equivalence, he adduces the Qur'ānic verse "You are light, abundant rain, and protection for us," in which a governor who governs well is described as "light by means of which one is guided." Having determined that light can mean guidance on the basis of profane poetry, Rāzī postulates that just as a good governor is described as the light of the city, the Qur'ān describes God as light because "He is the governor of the heavens and the earth with a far-reaching wisdom and a shining proof."<sup>40</sup>

Rāzī avails himself of the exegetical device of periphrasis to propose still other meanings for the Qur'ānic term *light*. He interprets the phrase "God is the light of the heavens and the earth" to mean that God illuminates the heavens and the earth. He equates light with illumination by inferring that intensive light illuminates. Having determined the semantic equivalence of light and illumination, Rāzī proposes three additional interpretations: (1) God illuminates the heavens and the earth with prophets; (2) God illuminates the heavens with the sun, the moon, and the stars; (3) God adorns the heaven with the sun, the moon, and the stars; and he adorns the earth with prophets and learned scholars.<sup>41</sup> All of the above figurative interpretations (and the devices that Rāzī uses to substantiate them) were conventional in *tafsīr* before

38. Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 23:224: "The scholars reported arguments about this. The first is that light is the cause of manifestation. But since guidance has this in common with light, the application of the term light to guidance is valid."

39. Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 23:224.

40. Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 23:224.

41. Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 23:224. See also *Lawāmi' al-bayyināt*, 237.

Rāzī's time, and by adopting them Rāzī follows the standard procedures of the Sunnī tradition of *tafsīr*.

To understand how Rāzī gives an unorthodox interpretation to the Qur'ānic term *light*, it is necessary to consider the exegetical difficulty that he confronts when he approaches the Light Verse. For Rāzī, the Qur'ānic phrase "God is the light of the heavens and the earth" poses an interpretive difficulty, since it establishes a relationship of identity between God and light, which is an earthly and temporal phenomenon. That light is an earthly and temporal phenomenon is suggested by the Qur'ān itself, which uses the term "*light*" interchangeably with the sun at Qur'ān 10, 5: "It is He who made the sun a radiance, and the moon a light, and determined it by stations, that you might know the number of the years and the reckoning. God created that not save with the truth, distinguishing the signs to a people who know" (10, 5).<sup>42</sup>

In Rāzī's view, the Qur'ānic phrase "God is the light of the heavens and the earth" identifies God with the earthly and temporal phenomenon of light. By doing so, it implies that God is like his creation (*tashbīh*) and similar to contingent entities. The exegetical difficulty that Rāzī confronts here can be formulated as follows: How is it possible to affirm that God *is* light without assimilating Him to contingent bodies or accidents—i.e., without falling into *tashbīh* and compromising God's transcendence?

In order to resolve this exegetical difficulty, Rāzī rules out the literal sense of the Qur'ānic phrase "God is the light of the heavens and the earth." He employs the logical method of division and investigation (*taqṣīm wa-sabr*) to show that the literal sense of this verse, which establishes a relationship of identity between God and perceptible (solar) light, is a rational impossibility. He argues as follows: Light that is perceptible to the visual faculty is a created entity. Created entities are either physical bodies or accidental qualities that inhere in bodies. Both bodies and accidents are contingent, however, since they derive their existence from God, who is self-sufficient. To claim that

42. That this is the only place where the Qur'ān equates God with light is pointed out by Rosenthal in *Knowledge Triumphant*, 155–193. The Qur'ān speaks more frequently of "the light of God," "a light that comes from God," and the "light sent down by Him." Commentators before Rāzī customarily understood the term *light* in these instances to refer metaphorically to the Qur'ān, since the Qur'ān, like light, provides guidance to mankind.

God is light is to say that He shares characteristics with His contingent creation, which is impossible. Rāzī subsequently excludes the literal sense as an interpretive possibility. By disclosing this rational impossibility, he gives himself the license to divert the meaning of light from its conventional sense.<sup>43</sup>

When Rāzī applies *taʿwīl* to the Qurʾānic phrase “God is the light of the heavens and the earth,” he intends to avoid falling into the trap of *tashbīh* (“likening God to His creation”). To find his way out of this difficulty, Rāzī adopts Ghazālī’s unorthodox theory of light, including its principle that light has a paradoxical nature. By embracing Ghazālī’s methodology, Rāzī departs from the Avicennian method of *taʿwīl* (which I analyzed earlier) and from the conventional methods of his Sunnī colleagues.

In *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* Rāzī substantiates and endorses the fundamental postulates of Ghazālī’s ontology. These postulates are modeled on Avicennian philosophy. Some of the ways that Ghazālī reinterpreted Avicennian philosophical ideas have already been explained by Treiger in his study of Ghazālī’s *Mishkāt al-anwār*. The central point, which is that light is another term for existence, is worth restating. Ghazālī reinterprets Avicenna’s chain of efficient causes by positing a hierarchy of lights. Such lights emanate upon one another and decrease in intensity. According to this model of the cosmos, the origin of this hierarchy of lights is God, who is the First Cause that bestows existence (or light) on all other beings. In Avicenna’s system the quiddities (or true natures) of things derive their existence ultimately from God, the First Cause. Analogously, in Ghazālī’s system lights derive their light from the first source of light—God. Because entities borrow their light/existence from God, they are darkness/nonexistence when considered in themselves. In contrast, God, who exists through Himself (and does not borrow His existence) is the real existent and absolute light.<sup>44</sup>

Ghazālī’s paradoxical theory of light, which Rāzī also affirms, has been discussed by Toshihiko Izutsu. Before examining Rāzī’s reception of Ghazālī’s principles, it will help to reiterate this theory. When Ghazālī applies *taʿwīl* to the term *light*, he proposes that the term has a conventional meaning, and that this meaning conforms to our ordinary experience of

43. Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 23.223. See also 1:122, where Rāzī gives the same argument. Rāzī also offers similar arguments in *Sharḥ asmāʾ Allāh al-ḥusnā*, 346–448.

44. Treiger, “Monism and Monotheism in al-Ghazālī’s *Mishkāt al-anwār*,” 7–9.

light. We consider light to be a physical body that is perceptible to the outer eye. Thus, the term *light* can refer to the sun's light, the moon's light, fire, or artificial light. All of these physical phenomena are perceptible to the outer eye (*baṣar*). Because they share the distinguishing characteristic of light, which is to make objects visible, the term *light* is an appropriate appellation for them.

Ghazālī proposes, however, that the term *light* has an additional meaning that does not tally with our outward sensory experience of physical light. According to him, the term also refers to an entity so luminous that it is imperceptible to the outer eye. It can be seen only by the "inner eye" (*baṣīra*), a term used in the Qur'ānic phrase "I call to God with certain knowledge" (12, 108). The light of the inner eye shares a function with apparent light. It makes objects manifest to inner perception and acts as an "indispensable support" for it. For Ghazālī (as well as for Rāzī) this light alone is real and deserves to be called light in the literal sense. Physical light, due to its weakness, refers to light in the figurative sense. As noted by Izutsu, this theory of light is unconventional because it inverts the figurative and literal senses of light. Both, however, retain the distinguishing feature of light, which is "to make [objects] manifest."<sup>45</sup>

When Rāzī interprets the term *light*, he adopts the fundamental postulates of Ghazālī's model of existence. He affirms that the privation of existence is equivalent to darkness and that the fullness of existence is equivalent to light. In order to describe the steps that Rāzī takes to integrate Ghazālī's *ta'wīl* of light into his system of thought, I turn now to several passages from Rāzī's exegesis of light. The first passage is excerpted from Rāzī's commentary on the divine names—*Lawāmi' al-bayyināt*.

Apparent light is that through which all hidden things appear, and hiddenness is nothing but non-existence (*'adam*), and manifestation is nothing but existence (*wujūd*). God's existence is not receptive to non-existence, [and] since [non-existence] undergoes change He is not receptive of darkness. God—glory be to Him—is that through which all things other than Him come into

45. Izutsu, "The Paradox of Light and Darkness in the Garden of Mystery of Shabastari," 289–291. On light, see also "Nūr" in *Encyclopedia of Islam* (second edition), 8:121–123 (W. Hartner and T. J. De Boer).

existence. He is the light of all darkness and the manifestation of all hiddenness, because the absolute light is God, indeed He is the light of lights.<sup>46</sup>

In *Lawāmi' al-bayyināt* Rāzī takes a step toward Ghazālī's conception of light by interpreting the divine name "light" in accordance with the principles Ghazālī establishes in *Mishkāt al-anwār*. Following Ghazālī's *ta'wīl* he equates darkness with nonexistence. Furthermore, he equates light with existence, since light is the medium through which all hidden things appear. God is the fullness of light (the "light of lights") or existence. His distinguishing characteristic is manifestation, and it is due to His manifestation that all entities come into existence.

In *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* Rāzī affirms this conception of light and attributes it to Ghazālī. He discerns that according to Ghazālī's theory, the distinguishing characteristic of the divine name "light" is disclosure (*al-tajallī*) or unveiling (*al-inkishāf*). In this text, too, he proposes that light is that through which all hidden things appear, and that all things come into existence through the manifestation of the Absolute Light.<sup>47</sup>

In *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* Rāzī reinforces this conception of light with Avicennian philosophical principles.<sup>48</sup> He identifies nonexistence with darkness and existence with light (*wa-l-'adam huwa al-ẓulma al-ḥāsila wa-l-wujūd huwa al-nūr*), and he identifies the fullness of light (or Absolute Light) with God's existence. Rāzī furthermore asserts that contingent entities are nonexistent when they are considered in respect to themselves, and that it is therefore appropriate to call them darkness. Contingent entities receive their existence from God, the Absolute Light that brings them into existence from the darkness of nonexistence.<sup>49</sup>

In *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* Rāzī also substantiates Ghazālī's paradoxical theory of light. In his commentary on the Qur'ānic phrase "God is the light of the

46. Rāzī, *Lawāmi' al-bayyināt*, 347; French trans. Gloton, 594. The significance of this passage is alluded to by Pourjavady in "Fahr-e Rāzī und Gazzālīs *Mishkāt al-anwār* (Lichternische)," 53.

47. Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 23:229.

48. These Avicennian principles are identified and explained by Treiger in "Monism and Monotheism in al-Ghazālī's *Mishkāt al-anwār*," 7–9.

49. Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 23:229.



heavens and the earth,” Rāzī justifies Ghazālī’s unorthodox theory of light. He writes:

Indeed the meaning of [God’s] being the light of the heavens and the earth is known in relation to the apparent, visual light. When you see the green of spring in the brightness of day you would not doubt that you see colors. You may even suppose that you do not see anything other than colors; and you may even say, “I see nothing with greenness other than greenness.” However, when the sun sets you apprehend that there is necessarily a distinction between colors when light falls on them and when it does not. Then there is no doubt that you will know that the true nature (*maʿnā*) of light differs from that of colors [and that it] is perceived with colors, except that, due to the intensity of its unification with it, it is not perceived, and due to its manifestation it is hidden, since sometimes manifestation can be a reason for hiddenness.<sup>50</sup>

In this selection Rāzī justifies Ghazālī’s theory that God’s light has its own true nature (*maʿnā*). Additionally, he affirms the paradoxical nature of light. This excerpt from *Mafātiḥ al-ghayb* contains several elements that are present in *Lawāmiʿ al-bayyināt*. Rāzī implies that the more manifest light is, the more hidden it is. God’s light is imperceptible to the outer senses (or hidden to the visual faculty) due to the intensity of its brilliance (i.e., its manifestness). Thus, Rāzī writes that “[light’s] manifestation can be a cause for hiddenness.”

According to this theory, light’s true nature is too intense to be perceptible to sight (*baṣar*). Its existence, however, can be known by analogy to its weaker manifestations that are perceptible to the outer senses. To illustrate this point Rāzī analogizes light’s intensity to the sun’s brilliance. When the sun’s light is especially intense, its light is hidden, although colors (which it makes manifest) are perceptible. The intensity of the sun’s light that makes manifest various colors can lead a person to deny light’s existence, since it becomes less manifest as light increases in intensity/becomes more brilliant. But when the sun sets and light diminishes, a person realizes that light is something other than color and that it has its own existence. Moreover, he realizes that

50. Rāzī, *Mafātiḥ al-ghayb*, 23:230. The sources for this passage lie in *Mishkāt al-anwār* (62).

although light is perceived with colors, it makes colors visible and is a cause for visual perception. Thus, even though light itself may not be perceived and we may not always be aware of its existence, it is nonetheless perceived with all things in the act of outward perception.

What is noteworthy about the reception of Ghazālī's interpretation of light in *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* is that it shows the extent to which Rāzī—the leading representative of Sunnī theology—accepted an unorthodox understanding of the Light Verse. What is perhaps more noteworthy is that Rāzī deems Ghazālī's interpretation of light (and his doctrine of disclosure or unveiling) perfectly compatible with Sunnī orthodoxy.<sup>51</sup> In the following concluding statement, Rāzī presents Ghazālī's theory as virtually the same as that of Sunnī commentators:

Know that this doctrine that we related from the shaykh Ghazālī (may God have mercy upon him) is an agreeable one. However, now that we have verified it the gist of it is that the meaning of God's being a light is that He is the creator of the world and that He is the creator of the perceptive faculties, and this meaning from our discussion is the meaning of His being the light of the heavens and the earth, which is that He guides the people of the heavens and the earth. There is no difference in meaning between his doctrine and the one we transmitted from the commentators. And God knows best.<sup>52</sup>

In this concluding statement Rāzī aims to convince his reader that Ghazālī's interpretation of light is not only justifiable but also consonant with the interpretations of previous Sunnī commentators. He goes so far as to equate Ghazālī's unconventional theory with his own orthodox Sunnī position, which is that the Qur'ānic phrase "God is the light of the heavens and the earth" means that God "guides the people of the heavens and the earth."



In the remainder of this chapter I explain the additional ways that Rāzī interprets the cosmic symbols of the Light Verse, calling attention to further disparate patterns of exegesis within his *ta'wīl* methodology. I begin by showing

51. That Rāzī's commentary on the Light Verse is an attempt to save Ghazālī's image as an orthodox theologian was first suggested by Landolt in "Ghazālī and *Religionswissenschaft*," 68.

52. Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 23:230.

how Rāzī continues Ghazālī's design that is inspired by Avicenna's rational approach to the Qur'ān. I then turn to the methods and ideas that Rāzī incorporates from classical Ṣūfism. By dissecting Rāzī's allegorical interpretation of Qur'ānic symbols, I highlight that Rāzī's methodology adapts to disparate patterns of exegesis from the classical *tafsīr* tradition.

Rāzī allegorizes the symbols of the Light Verse in *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* and *Asrār al-tanzīl wa-anwār al-ta'wīl*. In both texts he matches the sensorial symbols of the Light Verse with conceptual counterparts from the world of intelligibles. His methodology assumes a theory of similes that he establishes in *Nihāyat al-ījāz fī dirāyat al-i'jāz*, a concise treatise that discusses the Qur'ān's use of assimilation (*tashbīh*) and additional figures of speech. By situating Rāzī's interpretation of the Qur'ān's symbols in relation to this theory, we will be able to discern the principles of his *ta'wīl* methodology.

According to Rāzī's theory of rhetoric (*ʿilm al-bayān*), a simile (*tashbīh*) has two components: "the thing compared" or "the illustrated concept" (*mushabbah*) and "the thing compared to" or "the illustrative concept" (*mushabbah bihi*). Following the principles of rhetoric, Rāzī holds that there are four kinds of assimilation, or ways that one thing may be likened to another. These four possibilities are as follows: (1) both objects are perceptible to the senses; (2) both objects are intelligible objects or ideas; (3) the illustrated concept is perceptible to the intellect and the illustrative concept is a perceptible object; (4) the illustrated concept is perceptible to the senses and the illustrative concept is perceived by the intellect. In these kinds of similes, the illustrated concept and the illustrative concept share certain qualities but not others.<sup>53</sup>

Rāzī proposes that the Light Verse is a parable (*tamthīl*) that likens intelligible objects to objects that are perceptible to the senses. It thus falls within category (c) of similes. Among the similes that fit this category are the following: the assimilation of a proof (*ḥujja*) to light (*nūr*) that is perceptible to the eye; the assimilation of justice (*ʿadl*) to a scale (*qisṭāṣ*); and the assimilation

53. Rāzī, *Nihāyat al-ījāz fī dirāyat al-i'jāz*, 92–93. I have adopted the English expressions "illustrated concept" and "illustrative concept" as translations of *mushabbah* and *mushabbah bihi* from Walter G. Andrews, Jr. *An Introduction to Ottoman Poetry*, 72–85. The terms *tashbīh* and *tamthīl* in Rāzī's commentary are discussed briefly by Lagarde in *Les secrets de l'invisible*, 348–353. On the verb *shabbaha*, see Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, 2:1499.

of the frailty of those who do not seek God's protection to that of a spider's house, a comparison that appears in the following Qur'ānic verse: "The likeness of those who have taken to them protectors, apart from God, is as the likeness of the spider that takes itself a house" (29, 41).

In *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* Rāzī continues Ghazālī's Avicennian-inspired approach to the Light Verse. He adopts the nomenclature of light that Ghazālī devises to describe Avicenna's classification of the soul's faculties.<sup>54</sup> Additionally, he endorses Ghazālī's allegorization of the symbols of the Light Verse. By continuing this approach, Rāzī played a pivotal role in the process through which this model was naturalized into Sunnism. He made it possible for later commentators working in Muslim institutions of learning to use the Avicennian model as a resource within *tafsīr*. Baiḍāwī, for example, seems to have picked up the Avicennian-inspired approach to the Light Verse from Rāzī's exegesis.<sup>55</sup>

In section [1.3] Rāzī assumes the new terms that Ghazālī gives to the intellect and the visual faculty. Rāzī renames the intellect (which is the organ of inner vision) "the seeing spirit" (*al-ʿayn al-baṣīra*). He also renames the "visual faculty" (which is the organ of outer vision) "the seeing eye" (*al-ʿayn al-bāṣira*). In addition, Rāzī adopts the equivalence that Ghazālī establishes between intellect (or the seeing spirit) and light. He claims that the intellect—the "seeing spirit"—deserves the appellation of light because it is an active instrument of perception. Just as solar light makes perceptible things manifest and serves as an "indispensable foundation" for sight, intellect "makes manifest" universal concepts and propositions. Thus, Rāzī states that "since it is through the perceptive faculties that existents become manifest," intellect is worthy of the appellation "light," because it is a medium for sight.<sup>56</sup> While solar light merits the term *light*, since it is a medium for sight, intellect is more entitled to this label because it is an *active* instrument of perception.<sup>57</sup>

Furthermore, Rāzī endorses Ghazālī's classification of the soul's faculties that originates in the Avicennian philosophical canon. In the following

54. Some examples of such renaming are analyzed by Treiger in *Inspired Knowledge in Islamic Thought*, 74–78.

55. Baiḍāwī, *Anwār al-tanzīl wa-asrār al-taʾwīl*, 2:124–125.

56. Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 23:233.

57. Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 23:224–225.

excerpt from *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* Rāzī proposes (following Ghazālī) that each of the soul's faculties are lights, since various kinds of existents become manifest through them:

Ghazālī stated: we have made clear that the perceptive faculties [of the human soul] are lights, and that the degrees of human perceptive faculties are five: the first is the faculty of outer sense; it receives what the outer senses bring to it, and it is the basis of the spirit which endows one with life. It is primary since a living thing becomes alive through it, and it is found in infants. The second is the imaginative faculty; it affirms what the senses bring to it, and it preserves it as though it is a storehouse, so that it can expose them to the intellective faculty above it when it needs to. The third is the intellective faculty; it perceives the true natures of universals. The fourth is the cognitive faculty; it takes theoretical knowledge, then it puts their parts together; then it forms conclusions from that knowledge. The fifth is the sacred faculty by which the prophets and the saints are distinguished [from other human beings].<sup>58</sup>

In this excerpt Rāzī delineates the five faculties of the human soul and their perceptive functions. The five faculties of the human soul are: the faculty of outer sense, the imaginative faculty, the intellective faculty, the cogitative faculty, and the prophetic faculty. Rāzī claims that these faculties are worthy of being called lights, since they function like solar lights by making entities manifest. Thus, when writing about the power of the faculties, he states that "various classes of existents become manifest through them."<sup>59</sup> He acknowledges that the soul's faculties conjure the varied objects of knowledge; outer sense makes manifest sensorial images to the interior faculties; imagination presents images to the intellect; and the cogitative faculty makes manifest universal concepts and propositions.

In *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* Rāzī matches Ghazālī's classification of the soul's faculties with the cosmic symbols of the Light Verse. Following a Platonic outlook, he holds that the Qur'ān's symbols belong to the world of perception and that the soul's faculties are counterparts from the world of intelligibles. He again draws on his theory of similes (from the science of rhetoric) to correlate

58. Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 23:233.

59. Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 23:233.

the Qur'ān's symbols with the soul's faculties. The symbols are perceptible to the senses and therefore fall into the category of illustrative objects; the soul's faculties are perceptible to the intellect and therefore fall into the category of illustrated concepts. In the following scheme I disclose Rāzī's allegorization of the Qur'ān's symbols and infer the characteristics that they share with the soul's faculties.

- a. The **niche** symbolizes **outward sensory perception**. This is because the niche and sensory perception share a function. The niche is an aperture that serves to let light into a room, while sensory perception, which is enabled by apertures of the eyes, the two ears, and the nostrils, lets perceptibles into the interior of the soul.<sup>60</sup>
- b. The **glass** represents the **imaginative faculty**, which performs an analogous task. The glass acts as a transmitter of light; it conveys the light of the lamp, which sits in the niche, to the outside. Similarly, the faculty of imagination functions as a transmitter; it conveys knowledge that it receives from sense perception, preserves it in a storehouse and displays it to the intellective faculty when it is needed.<sup>61</sup>
- c. The **lamp** signifies the **intellective faculty**. This faculty is responsible for grasping universal concepts, which are the building blocks for the acquisition of knowledge. It makes the generation of knowledge possible, because it independently produces ideas. Similarly, the lamp makes light possible by serving as its source.<sup>62</sup>
- d. The **tree** stands for the **cogitative faculty**. The role of the cogitative faculty is to produce knowledge; it accomplishes this task by combining propositions and by drawing conclusions from them. The tree is the most appropriate material symbol for the cogitative faculty, because it bears fruit.<sup>63</sup>
- e. The Qur'ānic phrase **whose oil well nigh would shine, even if no fire touched it**, symbolizes the **sacred prophetic faculty** (*al-quwwa al-qudsiyya al-nabawiyya*). The sacred prophetic faculty is a unique ability that belongs to the cogitative faculty, which does not need educative prodding and is self-taught.<sup>64</sup>

60. Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 23:223.

61. Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 23:223.

62. Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 23:223–224.

63. Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 23:223–224.

64. Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 23:223–224.

When Rāzī allegorizes the symbols of the Light Verse in *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* he follows Ghazālī's interpretive method. The interpretations in (a) through (e) correspond exactly to those presented by Ghazālī in *Mishkāt al-anwār*. These, in turn, are modeled on Avicenna's allegorization of the Light Verse.<sup>65</sup>

What is noteworthy here is that the Avicennian theory of intuition (*ḥads*) underlies Rāzī's exegesis of the Qur'ānic phrase *whose oil well nigh would shine, even if no fire touched it*. Rāzī writes that "it is appropriate to call this species of cogitative faculty by the Qur'ānic phrase, as the oil that would shine even if no fire touches it," on account of its perfection, purity, and the strength of its aptitude. Now, although Rāzī drops the Avicennian key term *ḥads* ("intuition") here—as his predecessor Ghazālī does—the background to his interpretation is plainly Avicennian. We have already seen that when Rāzī comments on Avicenna's *Ishārāt* he interprets this Qur'ānic phrase to refer to the sacred prophetic power, which he identifies with "the far-reaching, noble intuitive power" (*al-quwwa al-ḥadsiyya*).<sup>66</sup>

My analysis of Rāzī's exegesis thus far reveals two ways that the process of appropriation and naturalization takes place within his works. It is plain that Rāzī absorbed philosophical ideas by operating as an Avicennian commentator and that he subsequently transferred such ideas across disciplinary

65. Treiger, *Inspired Knowledge in Islamic Thought*, 74–78.

66. Rāzī uses the expression *al-'ilm al-ḥadī* (intuitive knowledge) when he comments on the Qur'ānic phrase "but none understands [the parables] save those who know" (29, 43), but the passage is not helpful in determining the meaning of his interpretation of the Light Verse. Rāzī writes: "This verse has a philosophical meaning (*ma'nā ḥikmī*), which is that the intellectual (*al-'āqil*) acquires knowledge through intuition (*al-'ilm al-ḥadī*) whereas the critical knower (*'ālim*) acquires knowledge through theoretical thinking. Therefore when something apparent accidentally presents itself to the one who intellects, he apprehends it in accordance with its core, i.e., in view of the being apparent of the thing understood and the perceiver's intellecting is because when a problem [capable of being understood] is presented to him he apprehends it in accordance with its core. He sees the matter intuitively due to the perceived thing's being apparent and the perceiver's having [theoretical understanding]; he does not need to know the things prior to it. As for the critical thinker (*al-'ilm al-fikrī*) he needs prior knowledge. Now, sometimes he is critical to the utmost point of precision, so he might apprehend [the problem] but not apprehend it perfectly, but he has theoretical understanding of it since he has knowledge [of it]. Now that you know this, [know that] God's words, "but none understands them save those who know" (29, 43) mean that He strikes similitudes for people, but their true meaning and what they really convey are understood only by those with theoretical knowledge." Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 25:70.

boundaries (from *falsafa* into Sunnī *tafsīr*) by operating as a Qurʾān commentator. Additionally, Rāzī inherited Avicennian philosophical ideas directly from Ghazālī, who had devised a new nomenclature for Avicennian concepts. By channeling philosophical ideas into Sunnī *tafsīr*, Rāzī had given them undisputed authority and made it possible for later Sunnī commentators (including Baiḍāwī) to use them as a resource to interpret the Qurʾān.

#### 4.3 RĀZĪ'S DIVERGENCES FROM AVICENNA AND GHAZĀLĪ: LIGHT AS THE BESTOWAL OF KNOWLEDGE

Now that I have examined the ways that Rāzī interprets the Light Verse in *Sharḥ al-ishārāt* and *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, I turn to a third work in which Rāzī comments on this verse, namely *Asrār al-tanzīl wa-anwār al-taʾwīl* ("The Secrets of Revelation and the Lights of Interpretation"). In this work, which seems to have gone largely unnoticed in scholarship, Rāzī also allegorizes the Light Verse by interiorizing its symbols. What is significant about his interpretation of this verse is that it embraces principles and ideas from classical Ṣūfism, and that it diverges from the philosophical and rationalistic methodologies that we have described above.<sup>67</sup> The vocabulary and substance of this work suggest that despite his rationalistic and philosophical tendencies, Rāzī also embraced methods of exegesis that invoke the authority of divine inspiration. As we shall see, my analysis of *Asrār al-tanzīl wa-anwār al-taʾwīl* confirms that in Rāzī's view, religious knowledge, which is represented by light, can be bestowed upon an individual *rather than attained through the intellect's self-effort*.

Before Rāzī composed *Asrār al-tanzīl* he had already incorporated classical Ṣūfī themes into *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*. His commentary on Qurʾān 18, 9-12 draws heavily on the resources of Ṣūfism in order to distinguish between miracles and saintly marvels.<sup>68</sup> When Rāzī expatiates on the theme of light in *Mafātīḥ*

67. For analyses of interpretations of the Light Verse, see Böwering, "The Light Verse: Qurʾānic Text and Sūfī Interpretation," 113–144; Nwiya, *Exégèse coranique et langage mystique*, 94–97. On Sufi exegesis, see Elias, *The Throne Carrier of God. The Life and Thought of ʿAlāʾ ad-dawla as-Simnānī*; Böwering, *The Mystical Vision of Existence in Classical Islam. The Qurʾānic Hermeneutics of the Ṣūfī Saḥl At-Tustarī* (d. 283/896); Baffioni, "Metaphors of Light and the 'Verse of Light' in the Brethren of Purity," 163–177.

68. According to Shihadeh (*The Teleological Ethics*, 10), Rāzī composed this treatise after he wrote *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*. It may thus be considered Rāzī's final treatise on Qurʾānic exegesis.



*al-ghayb* he also has recourse to Ṣūfī methods and ideas to address the multiplicity of questions that he derived from Qurʾānic verses. In the following selection from *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* Rāzī cites one Ṣūfī allegorical scheme of the Light Verse. Although he does not endorse this interpretation, this version seems to have influenced the version in *Asrār al-tanzīl*. Rāzī writes:

The doctrine of the Ṣūfis is that God—may He be exalted—likened the chest to the niche, the heart to the glass, and knowledge (*māʾirifa*) to the lamp. This lamp is kindled from [oil of] the blessed tree, and that is the inspiration (*ilhāmāt*) of the angels, as in God’s words, “He sends down the angels with the spirit of His command” (16, 2), and His words, “brought down by the Trustworthy Spirit upon your heart” (26, 193). God likened the angels to the blessed tree due to the multiplicity of their valuable uses, and indeed He described it as being *neither of the East nor of the West*, on account of its spiritual nature. And God described them [the angels] by His words, *whose oil well nigh would shine, even if no fire touched it*, on account of their abundant knowledge and their intense cognizance of the secrets of God’s dominion; here it is obvious that the illustrated object is not the same as the illustrative object.<sup>69</sup>

The above interpretation of the Light Verse exhibits a familiar epistemic theme, namely that knowledge is light.<sup>70</sup> But in contrast to the rationalistic interpretations, which rely on Avicennian philosophical ideas to describe how the intellect acquires theoretical knowledge *through its own efforts*, it draws on Ṣūfī concepts to illustrate how religious knowledge is *bestowed upon* a believer’s soul. This theme features again in Rāzī’s *Asrār al-tanzīl wa-anwār al-taʾwīl*, and it is worth quoting because it shares characteristics with the version that he affirms in *Asrār al-tanzīl wa-anwār al-taʾwīl*.

In the above selection Rāzī describes that, according to one position of the Ṣūfis, each “illustrative concept” (*mushabbah*) of the Light Verse correlates to an “illustrated object” concerning the believer’s soul. The above allegorical

On Rāzī’s integration of Sufi elements into *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, see Gramlich’s translation of Rāzī’s commentary on Qurʾān 18, 9–12 in “Faḥr ad-dīn ar-Rāzī’s Kommentar zu sure 18, 9–12,” 99–152. On Rāzī’s inclination to the Ṣūfī path of knowledge, see now Rustom, “Ibn ‘Arabī’s Letter to Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī: A Study and Translation,” 113–137.

69. Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 23:234–235.

70. On this theme in classical Islam, see Rosenthal, *Knowledge Triumphant*, 155ff.

scheme proposes that the pronoun *his*, which appears in the Qur'ānic phrase *The likeness of his Light is as a niche*," refers to the believer. Consequently, the niche symbolizes the light of the believer's chest (rather than God's light). Additionally, the glass symbolizes the believer's heart, and the lamp stands for religious knowledge (*ma'rifa*). Most significantly, the above allegorical scheme proposes that the lamp of knowledge, which sits in the believer's heart, is kindled by the oil of the blessed tree. Furthermore, the blessed tree refers to the angels that inspire the believer's heart. According to this exegesis, the idea that the lamp's light is kindled by the blessed tree is meant to convey that the believer's religious knowledge is increased by the "inspiration" (*ilhām*) of angels, a reading that is supported by two Qur'ānic phrases: "He sends down the angels with the spirit of His command" (16, 2) and "brought down by the Trustworthy Spirit upon your heart" (26, 193).

In *Asrār al-tanzīl* Rāzī also allegorizes the Light Verse by interiorizing its symbols.<sup>71</sup> In this treatise he postulates that the heart (*qalb*) is the locus of religious belief (*īmān*) and knowledge of God.<sup>72</sup> Following the established methodology of classical Ṣūfism, he implies that knowledge is conceptually equivalent to light.<sup>73</sup> He maintains, furthermore, that religious belief and inspirational knowledge (*ma'rifa*) are best represented by light.<sup>74</sup> This is because, just as the light of a lamp can increase in intensity, so also the heart's states or inner conditions can increase in religious knowledge. Indeed, the more divine knowledge that a person acquires, the greater amount of light his heart attains. The absence of divine knowledge in the heart (or the heart's ignorance) is likened to darkness, and the conditions or states in which it receives such knowledge are likened to illumination. Rāzī thus considers it fitting to speak analogously

71. The three articles that treat Rāzī's exegesis of the Light Verse do not discuss this treatise: H. Landolt, "Ghazālī and Religionswissenschaft," 19–72; Pourjavadi, "Fahr-e Rāzī und Gazzālīs Mishkāt al-anwār (Lichternische)," 49–70; Hajjaji-Jarrah, *Āyat al-Nūr: A Metaphor for Where We Come From, What We Are, and Where We Are Going*, 169–181.

72. For a study of Ṣūfī concepts concerning attainment of knowledge, see Heer, *A Treatise on the Heart*, attributed to Al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī (D. c. 300/912), in *Three Early Sufi Texts* (Bayān al-Farq bayn al-Ṣadr wa-al-Qalb wa-al-Fu'ād wa-al-Lubb).

73. For a discussion of this theme in Ṣūfism, see Rosenthal, *Knowledge Triumphant*, 154–193.

74. On the relationship between *ma'rifa* and 'ilm in Ṣūfism, see Rosenthal, *Knowledge Triumphant*, 165–176. On 'ilm, see *Encyclopedia of Islam* (second edition), 3: 1133–1134 (ED.); on *ma'rifa*, see *Encyclopedia of Islam* (second edition) 6: 568–571 (R. Arnaldez).

about the light of knowledge (*nūr al-māʾrifa*) or the lamp of knowledge (*sirāj al-māʾrifa*) when he refers to the heart's knowledge of the divine.

In addition to the postulates that I have briefly outlined earlier, Rāzī's allegorical exegesis also presupposes the theory of similes from the science of rhetoric (*ʿilm al-bayān*). Rāzī proposes that the Light Verse compares illustrative objects perceived by the senses to illustrated concepts that are grasped by the intellect. To allegorize the Qurʾān's symbols, Rāzī identifies characteristics that are shared by Qurʾānic symbols and the soul's inner states of religious knowledge. I turn now to the ways that Rāzī correlates Qurʾānic symbols to their counterparts in the soul.

### i. The Symbolism of the Fire (*Nār*)

When Rāzī allegorizes the symbols of the Light Verse, he substitutes inner conditions of the soul for Qurʾānic symbols. According to his methodology of substitution, the soul's inner states fall into the category of illustrated concepts, and the Qurʾān's symbols fall into the category of illustrative perceptible objects. Rāzī begins by establishing that the Qurʾānic symbol of the fire represents religious belief (*īmān*). To rationalize this correspondence he adduces the following Qurʾānic verse that likens belief to fire: "The likeness of them is as the likeness of a man who kindled a fire" (2, 17). Rāzī then substantiates the idea that fire acts as a purifying substance. When adulterated gold is placed in fire, its debased part is consumed and the substance of gold is purified. Similarly, when sinners befall the fire on the day of resurrection, their sins are consumed and their religious belief is purified. To further justify the substitution of belief for fire, Rāzī points out that fire and religious belief behave similarly; just as fire consumes all things when it burns, so also religious belief, when it becomes stronger, extinguishes all things other than God's love from the heart.<sup>75</sup>

### ii. The Symbolism of the Light (*Nūr*)

Rāzī interprets the term *light* (*nūr*) in the Qurʾānic verse "the likeness of His light," to refer to a further inner condition of the heart, which is the state

75. Rāzī, *Asrār al-tanzīl*, 79.

of religious belief (*īmān*). By correlating the former perceptible symbol with the latter concept he implies that religious belief may increase in intensity in the same way that light may increase in intensity. Rāzī equates religious belief (*īmān*) with knowledge of the divine (*maʿrifa*). He justifies the eminence of such divine knowledge by adducing the Qurʾānic expression “the likeness of His light.” Rāzī reasons that when God expressed this Qurʾānic phrase, He annexed the phenomenon of light to Himself, and that by doing so He ennobled it. God also ennobled His house (22, 26), the She-camel (7, 73), and His servant (72, 19) by annexing them to Himself. Rāzī further implies that because light is conceptually equivalent to knowledge of the divine, the knowledge (*maʿrifa*) that human beings discover about God is the most eminent.<sup>76</sup>

### iii. The Symbolism of the Lamp (*Sirāj*)

Rāzī allegorizes the Qurʾānic expression “the likeness of His light is as a niche wherein is a lamp” by interiorizing the Qurʾānic symbol of the lamp. He interprets the perceptible light of the lamp (*nūr al-sirāj*) to refer to the light of knowledge (*nūr al-maʿrifa*) that resides in the heart. Drawing on his theory of similes, he proposes that the Qurʾānic lamp and the light of the heart are suitable counterparts because they share the quality of illumination. Just as a lamp enclosed by a glass and placed in an aperture illuminates the interior and exterior of a house, so also the light of the heart illuminates itself and the bodily parts to which it is attached. When the heart is illuminated by God’s light, it incites the limbs to perform acts of obedience, which are the rituals prescribed by the religious law.<sup>77</sup>

### iv. The Symbolism of the Glass (*Zujāja*)

When Rāzī allegorizes the Qurʾānic symbol of the glass (*zujāja*), he also draws on his theory of similes by substituting illustrated concepts for the Qurʾān’s illustrative objects. He establishes correspondences between the former and the latter by identifying their shared characteristics. Rāzī implies that the glass in which the lamp is enclosed and the heart share the quality

76. Rāzī, *Asrār al-tanzīl*, 79–80.

77. Rāzī, *Asrār al-tanzīl*, 81.

of translucency. This shared quality makes them suitable counterparts. Just as the glass is a translucent entity that transmits the lamp's light, so also the heart's translucent nature enables it to receive God's light.<sup>78</sup>

According to Rāzī's theory of rhetoric in *Nihāyat al-ijāz fī dirāyat al-i'jāz*, the Light Verse and the Qur'ān's other parables are models of assimilation (*tashbih*), which, like other figures of speech, give the Qur'ān a literary beauty that is unmatched.<sup>79</sup> In *Asrār al-tanzīl* Rāzī implies that the Light Verse is a model of assimilation because its illustrative objects or symbols best convey the illustrated concepts that they symbolize. When Rāzī allegorizes the Light Verse in this work, he frequently provides a rational justification for these relationships of perfect correspondence. For instance, when he allegorizes the Qur'ānic symbol of the glass, Rāzī explains why the glass is the ideal symbol for the heart's translucency. In the following passage Rāzī explains why the symbol and the symbolized are perfect counterparts:

Gold and silver, although they are both valuable and high-ranking, are nonetheless dense [and] concealment befalls them both. Even though the glass is of little value it is nonetheless subtle and clear, and concealment does not befall it. This is because its exterior can be seen from its interior and vice versa. God the exalted mentioned this exemplar in order to remove the veil, not to set it down.<sup>80</sup>

In this passage Rāzī explains why glass (rather than gold or silver) ideally conveys the heart's translucency. Gold and silver have dense and opaque natures. Such natures do not allow light to pass through them; rather than disclose light, they conceal it. Glass, on the other hand, transmits light and discloses it. It thus perfectly expresses what the Light Verse means to convey—the veils, which prevent the heart from receiving illumination of God's light, can be lifted. Because the purpose of the parable is to disclose that the heart

78. It is somewhat curious that Rāzī does not cite the famous Veils Tradition in this context. He does, however, cite it in *Tā'sīs al-taqdīs*. This is noted by Pourjavady in his study on Rāzī's relationship to Ghazālī in the *Niche of Lights*. See Pourjavady, "Fakhr-e Rāzī und Gazzālīs *Mishkāt al-anwār* (Lichternische)," 57.

79. Lagarde, *Les secrets de l'invisible*, 22. On the theory of the Qur'ān's inimitability, see Johns, "A Humanistic Approach to *i'jāz* in the Qur'ān: The Transfiguration of Language," 79–99.

80. Rāzī, *Asrār al-tanzīl*, 84.

is receptive to God's light (and gold and silver conceal light because of their density and opacity), only the glass serves as an apt object for the medium through which light is transmitted to the heart.

Rāzī explains the Qur'ān's comparison of the glass to the astral star. While the previous similes we have examined fall into category (c), since they compare an intellectual object to a perceptible object, the comparison of the glass to the astral star is a simile of type (a). This simile compares one perceptible object to another, in the same way that the Qur'ān does in the following phrase: "And the moon—We have determined it by stations, till it returns like an aged palm-bough" (36, 39). Rāzī interprets the Qur'ānic symbol of the astral star to refer to guidance for people on earth, and he justifies this interpretation on the basis of the Qur'ānic expression "and waymarks; and by the stars they are guided" (16, 16). Just as the astral star serves as a guide for people on earth, so also the heart of the believer (*qalb al-mu'min*) serves as guidance for the heart. By encasing the heart, the glass enables it to be guided to good works (*al-khayrāt*).<sup>81</sup>



My analysis of *Asrār al-tanzīl* confirms that Rāzī completely drops the Avicennian noetic scheme that he supports in *Sharḥ al-ishārāt* and in *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*. Further, it confirms that Rāzī drops Ghazālī's reinterpretation of Avicenna's philosophical scheme, which he supports in *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* and substantiates using multiple innovative arguments. By not recognizing these schemes, he disclaims the philosophical interpretation that proposes that the intellect acquires theoretical knowledge through its own efforts of discursive reasoning or intuition (*ḥads*).

According to the alternative model and epistemic scheme that Rāzī designs under the influence of Ṣūfī methodology, knowledge of the divine is *bestowed* upon an individual's heart, which is the seat of religious belief and can be strengthened through divine inspiration. The contrast between the Avicennian philosophical model and the inspirational model that Rāzī designs in *Asrār al-tanzīl* is evinced in the latter work's epistemic scheme, which stresses the heart's reception of knowledge through the allegorization of Qur'ānic symbols. Thus, when Rāzī allegorizes the lamp in (iii) he implies

81. Rāzī, *Asrār al-tanzīl*, 85.

that God's light illumines (*yudī'u*) the light of the heart (which is the light of knowledge). And when Rāzī allegorizes the glass in (iv) he stresses that the heart's translucent nature enables it to receive God's light. Indeed, he argues that the Qur'ān selects the glass—rather than gold or silver—as a symbol precisely because of its translucency, since translucency most effectively conveys the ideas that the heart is receptive to God's light and that divine knowledge is *bestowed* upon an individual.

What conclusions about Rāzī's methodology can one draw from the diverse ways that he interprets the Light Verse?

The examples that I have analyzed provide evidence that Rāzī enthusiastically helped himself to the diverse interpretive methods that were current in his milieu. Additionally, they confirm that he applied multiple methods of interpretation to single Qur'ānic verses in order to reach the breadth and depth of meanings that God had deposited in the Qur'ān. (Of course, Rāzī's commentaries on the Light Verse provide just one example of the range of interpretive methods and ideas that he brought to the task of Qur'ānic exegesis—many other examples from the vast depository of *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* could be easily adduced to corroborate this hypothesis.)

On the basis of my analysis of Rāzī's expatiations on the Light Verse, I contend that the nature and aims of the genres in which Rāzī worked predisposed him to adopt certain interpretive methods—including different *kinds* of allegorical exegesis—that were current in those genres. Furthermore, I propose that the ideas that Rāzī supports in his explanations of the Light Verse are naturally inflected by such interpretive methods; and that when Rāzī assumed various kinds of allegorical exegesis he was guided to augment and refine the ideas that were tied to them. Let me explain further by referring to the examples that illustrate how Rāzī's borrowing of methods guided him to adopt contrasting ideas that pulled his system of thought in various directions.

In his role as a philosophical commentator, Rāzī aimed to expound on (as well as critique) the system of philosophy that Avicenna had developed in his *Ishārāt*. When Rāzī elaborated on Avicenna's exegesis of the Light Verse, he assumed the latter's method of allegorical interpretation that establishes correspondences between Qur'ānic symbols and philosophical concepts; and he adopted the cornerstone of his epistemic scheme, namely intuition (*ḥads*). It was thus by assuming Avicenna's interpretive method that Rāzī adopted



central Avicennian epistemological concepts. And it was by adopting such concepts that Rāzī's exegesis of the Qur'ān was pulled in the direction of Avicennian philosophy and that Sunnī *tafsīr* became aligned with the heritage of ancient and Islamic philosophy.

While working as a Qur'ān commentator in *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* Rāzī aimed to corroborate, augment, and refine Ghazālī's exegesis of the Light Verse. When Rāzī carried out these tasks, he assumed Ghazālī's innovative method of *ta'wīl* and embraced the unconventional ideas that were inflected by it: a reinterpretation of the Aristotelian-Avicenna's epistemic scheme that employed a novel nomenclature of light; a paradoxical ontology of illumination that inverted the plain and figurative senses of light; and an allegorical interpretation of Qur'ānic symbols that explained how the intellect acquires knowledge. Rāzī's efforts to corroborate, augment, and refine Ghazālī's method of *ta'wīl* pulled his exegesis in the direction of Ghazālī's methodology and placed the worldview of Sunnī *tafsīr* in line with the theological worldview that Ghazālī developed in *Mishkāt al-anwār*.

When Rāzī approached the Light Verse in *Asrār al-tanzīl*, a work in which he discovers the "inner meanings" of select Qur'ānic verses by "interiorizing" Qur'ānic symbols, he naturally assumed the Ṣūfī method of Qur'ānic interpretation and embraced the Ṣūfī ideas that were knotted to the Ṣūfī thread of exegesis: the notion that a person's religious belief can be strengthened through divine inspiration and the notion that religious knowledge of the divine is bestowed upon an individual's heart rather than achieved through the intellect's self effort. It was by adopting these salient characteristics of Ṣūfī methodology that Rāzī adapted his Qur'ān commentary to additional sources of authority that had not yet been fully integrated into Sunnī *tafsīr*.

Let me conclude with a final point about Rāzī's overall methodology and system of thought. The interpretive methods and ideas that are evinced in Rāzī's expatiations on the Light Verse provide evidence that his intellectual outlook developed in divergent—and often contrasting—directions. One might be tempted to infer that such divergent and contrasting directions point to unresolved tensions and inconsistencies in his system of thought. Indeed, one could argue that the Aristotelian-Avicennian rational epistemology that Rāzī favors in *Sharḥ al-ishārāt* is incompatible with the alternative theory of religiously inspired knowledge that he advances in *Asrār al-tanzīl*,



and that such an inconsistency undermines the unity of his philosophical theology.

I contend that it is more reasonable to conclude that the divergent and contrasting directions of Rāzī's exegesis testify to a strength in his methodology. The breadth of interpretive methods and ideas that are exhibited in Rāzī's expatiations on the Light Verse point to the extraordinary flexibility of his overall methodology—a flexibility that is unprecedented in medieval Islamic exegesis. Additionally, they point to the expansive nature of his theological worldview that he forged for the intellectual orthodoxy of Sunnism. Rāzī's liberality towards methods and ideas—both ancient and Islamic—enabled him to align his Qur'ān commentary with multiple sources of authority that had not yet been canonized into the *tafsīr* tradition. It was this broad-minded approach to the science of Qur'ānic interpretation that enabled Rāzī to achieve one of his chief objectives: to give the voices of ancient and Islamic philosophers undisputed authority in medieval Islamic exegesis and to integrate their systems of knowledge into the intellectual orthodoxy of Sunnism.

## CHAPTER FIVE

# INTERPRETING THE SOUL AND SPIRIT



My principal aim in this chapter is to illustrate how Rāzī forges his doctrine on the soul in *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*.<sup>1</sup> I investigate how he raises and resolves difficulties concerning the soul's nature, its temporal origination, its relation to the body, its status during sleep and death, and its intellectual and moral perfection, within the context of Qur'ānic exegesis.

I argue that Rāzī opposes the doctrinal positions that were current in his intellectual milieu (especially among the *falāsifa* and *mutakallimūn*) by endorsing a materialistic explanation of the soul that has its roots in the ancient Greek school of Stoicism.<sup>2</sup> My interest here is in providing evidence that Rāzī adopts the main elements of his doctrine on the soul from Naẓẓām—the radical Mu'tazilite who borrowed this theory into classical Islam—and in showing how Rāzī molds it into Sunnī *tafsīr* to explain Qur'ānic ideas about the divine formation of man. In my analysis I pay special attention to the exegetical methods that Rāzī employs to give philosophical meaning to Qur'ānic terms and ideas; and I pay special attention to the way that he

1. Chapter five uses material by the author originally published in *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 6, no. 1 (2014), Edinburgh University Press.

2. For a study of Rāzī's views on the soul in his philosophical works, see now Janssens, "Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī on the Soul: A Critical Approach to Ibn Sīnā," 563–579.

aligns his theory of the soul with a cosmology that synthesizes Hellenistic and Qur'ānic teachings.

In this chapter I also explain Rāzī's understanding of the soul's intellectual and moral development. My focus here is on the way that Rāzī transfers principles and ideas across disciplinary boundaries—from his works of theology (*kalām*) and philosophy (*falsafa*) into the genre of Qur'ān commentary (and into the worldview of Sunnism)—in order to explain the intellectual and moral perfection of the prophet's soul. When I examine this aspect of Rāzī's theory of the soul I highlight the congruity that he discovers between Qur'ānic patterns of reasoning (or the Qur'ān's divine logic, to borrow Lagarde's vocabulary) and the principles and ideas that he had developed in his rational works of *kalām* and *falsafa*.

My overall analysis of the theory of the soul in *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* underscores the innovative methodology that Rāzī developed within Sunnī *tafsīr* and which he hoped his successors within the tradition would emulate. Like other Muslim theologians, Rāzī elaborated on and critiqued theories of the soul that ancient and Muslim philosophers developed. But in contrast to his masters and colleagues, he forged his doctrine on the soul by postulating that the solutions to difficulties concerning the soul were already worked out by divine reasoning and that they were embedded in Qur'ānic verses for human reason to discover. His new methodology for Qur'ānic interpretation placed the rational method (and liberal use) of *ta'wīl* at its forefront; and by doing so, it attempted to displace the intellectual procedure of arguments and counterarguments that was characteristic of philosophical texts and theological compendia in medieval Islam.

## 5.1 RĀZĪ'S EXEGESIS ON THE SOUL (NAFS) AND SPIRIT (RŪḤ): STRUCTURE AND STRATEGY

I begin by describing the structure and strategy of Rāzī's excursion into the soul and vital spirit that appears in his commentary on Qur'ān 17, 85: "And they will ask you [Muḥammad] about the spirit (*rūḥ*), say: 'the spirit is of my Lord's command (*amr*). And you have been given only a little knowledge.'" By examining Rāzī's excursus we will be able to discern how he supplements

traditional and lexical practices of exegesis with theoretical considerations and questions concerning the soul. Additionally, we will be able to discern the nature of the debates about the soul that he incorporates into *Maḥāṭiḥ al-ghayb*.

- [1] First question (*mas'ala*): On the doctrines of the exegetes concerning the term *spirit* mentioned in this verse
  - [1.1] First point of investigation (*baḥṭh*): On the true nature of the soul and its quiddity
  - [1.2] Second point of investigation (*baḥṭh*): On the soul's temporal origination
- [2] Second question (*mas'ala*): On the remaining doctrines that commentators have mentioned about the term *spirit* (*rūḥ*) cited in this verse
- [3] Third question (*mas'ala*): An explanation of the doctrines concerning man's true nature (*ḥaqīqat al-insān*)
  - [3.1] Seventeen rational and scriptural arguments that demonstrate that man's true nature is not the body or something bodily
  - [3.2] Point of investigation (*baḥṭh*): That man's true nature is not the body that is perceived by the senses
- [4] Fourth question (*mas'ala*): An explanation of the doctrines attributed to those who assert that man's true nature is a body that is found in the interior of the human frame
- [5] Fifth question (*mas'ala*): On the rational evidences that affirm the soul's existence
  - [5.1] Two decisive arguments that affirm the soul's existence
  - [5.2] Four arguments that affirm the soul's unity
- [6] Sixth question (*mas'ala*): On affirming that the soul is not a body
  - [6.1] Six scriptural proofs (*al-dalā'il al-sam'iyya*) that affirm that the soul is not a body
- [7] On the evidence that this verse signifies that the soul is an immaterial spiritual substance

The structure and format of Rāzī's excursus reveal the strategies and methods that he uses to extend the scope of *tafsīr* to include philosophical considerations and debates. Rāzī uses the canonical material from the rich classical tradition of *tafsīr* as a basis for his exegesis; he gathers and

collects interpretations from earlier commentators, and he relies on lexical analysis and prophetic traditions in order to establish the multivalency of key Qurʾānic terms, notably *rūḥ* (spirit). But he departs from the classical *tafsīr* tradition by building theoretical considerations into his exegesis. One way he does this is by focusing on conceptual issues that relate to this key term. Thus, sections [1] and [2] are discussions that serve as the starting point for Rāzī's exegesis. Here, Rāzī collects diverse semantic values of the Qurʾānic word *rūḥ* and relies mainly on lexicography, prophetic traditions, and textual analogy. Sections [1.1], [1.2], and [7] are theoretical discussions. In these, Rāzī addresses philosophical considerations concerning the soul by investigating the soul's true nature, its temporal origination, and its relation to the body.

In [1] Rāzī collates the diverse values of the word *rūḥ* and establishes the multivalency of this key term. In this lexical discussion he proposes that the term *rūḥ* has a primary signification. This is the notion of "life-breath" that God breathes into human beings. The notion provides a conceptual foundation for the alternative readings that Rāzī establishes using the interpretive devices of textual analogy and periphrastic exegesis. Rāzī finds support for the primary signification of "spirit" as "life-breath" in the Qurʾān, which binds together these concepts on several occasions.<sup>3</sup> In the Qurʾānic phrase "And (when) I formed man and breathed into him from My spirit" (15, 29; 32, 9; 38, 72), God creates man by breathing into him. In the Qurʾānic expressions "We breathed into her of Our spirit and appointed her and her son to be a sign unto all beings" (21, 91) and "so We breathed into her of Our spirit, and she confirmed the Words of her Lord" (66, 12), "spirit" is used to mean the life-breath that God breathes into Mary to cause the conception of Jesus.

One way that Rāzī establishes the multivalency of the term *rūḥ* is by collecting the diverse values of this key term that appear elsewhere in the Qurʾān. In his commentary on the Qurʾānic phrase "We supported him with the Holy Spirit" (2, 87), Rāzī states:

3. The multivalency of the word "spirit" in classical Arabic is discussed in Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, 1:1180. See "Nafs" in *Encyclopedia of Islam* (second edition), 7:880–883 (E. E. Calverley); Macdonald, "The Development of the Idea of Spirit in Islam," 307–351; Blachère, "Note sur le substantif nafs, 'souffle vital,' 'ame,' dans le Coran," 69–77.

Know that the term spirit is applied metaphorically to Gabriel, the *Injil*, and the Great Name because spirit is a breath which comes and goes (*al-rīḥ al-mutaraddid*) in the orifices of man (*fī makhāriq al-insān wa-manāfidhihi*). It is well known that these three things are not spirit in that sense. Nonetheless, each one of these three things is called spirit by way of assimilation (*tashbih*) insofar as [just as] the spirit is the cause of life in man, Gabriel is the cause of knowledge in the life of hearts.<sup>4</sup>

In this selection Rāzī maintains that the primary signification of *ruh* is “life-breath,” and he defines the life-breath as the spirit present in the two nostrils and the mouth.<sup>5</sup> He postulates that the remaining values of this term, which appear elsewhere in the Qurʾān, are metaphorical expressions of this concept. These values include the angel Gabriel, Jesus, the *Injil*, and the Qurʾān. All of these values, because they express the meaning of life-breath metaphorically, are conceptually subordinate to the primary signification of *ruh* as life-breath.

For Rāzī, the Qurʾān is a key metaphorical expression for the term *ruh*. He establishes the semantic equivalence of spirit and Qurʾān by using the exegetical device of textual analogy. In addition, he maintains that the word “spirit” in the following verse refers to the Qurʾān, since the Qurʾān brings forth life from the death of ignorance and unbelief: “Even We have revealed to thee a spirit of Our bidding” (42, 52). On other occasions he maintains that the primary meaning of spirit is the cause of life: “Even so We have revealed to you a *ruh* of Our affair” (42, 52); “casting the spirit of His affair upon whomever He will of his servants” (40, 15). In his commentary on these verses Rāzī proposes that the primary meaning of spirit is the cause of life. Moreover, revelation causes life insofar as it leads one to attain intimate knowledge of the divine; thus, here, too, spirit refers to revelation (*waḥy*).<sup>6</sup>

There are other ways that Rāzī extends the scope of *tafsīr* to include theoretical considerations and to turn the practice of exegesis into a context in

4. Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 3:161. On Rāzī’s exegesis of the “great name,” see Rāzī’s *Sharḥ al-asmāʾ Allāh al-ḥusnā*, 88–100.

5. On “makhāriq” and “manāfidh,” see Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, 1:729; 1:2823.

6. Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 27:39.

which philosophical questions can be examined. One of these ways is by recording all the available knowledge about the soul's nature that Muslim theologians, philosophers, and physicians developed in the ninth through twelfth centuries. In order to carry out this task Rāzī alters his mode of operation as a commentator; he digresses from the practice of lexical and traditional exegesis, toward the practice of philosophical investigation.<sup>7</sup> This is revealed in the structure and format of his excursus that I have outlined earlier. In blocks [3] through [6.1] Rāzī organizes all such knowledge by using the organizational format of questions (*masā'il*). In addition, he analyzes arguments into their component parts and the propositions on which they depend by using the logical technique of elimination and investigation (*taqṣīm wa-sabr*).

For Rāzī, the exercise of recording knowledge prompts another task—raising and resolving the disputed questions that were current in his milieu. In addition to investigating the diverse theories that various intellectuals had developed to explain the soul's true nature, origin, and relation to the body, Rāzī also reconciles the disputes on these issues that arose between the *falāsifa* and the *mutakallimūn*. By Rāzī's time, both of these intellectual groups had developed weighty arguments for their positions on these issues. The former group generally adopted a Hellenistic outlook by regarding the soul or self (*ḥaqīqat al-insān*) as an immaterial substance. The latter group had developed its own physical theory of cosmology, and it viewed the soul as an atom (or an accident inhering in an atom). One of Rāzī's aims in his excursus is to reconcile Hellenistic theories with the doctrinal positions on the soul that Muslim theologians had developed using their cosmology of atoms and attributes.

Let me turn briefly to sections [3] through [6], since these blocks illustrate the methods that Rāzī uses to reconcile the doctrinal positions on the soul that had developed in the *ʿaqlī* ("rational") and *naqlī* ("traditional") bodies of knowledge. In these sections Rāzī systematically catalogues arguments ("affirmations and refutations") that the *falāsifa* and *mutakallimūn* had developed, and he analyzes them by breaking them down into their

7. That Rāzī does not consider these philosophical investigations part of the ordinary practice of *tafsīr* is suggested by the remark, "Let us return to the science of *tafsīr*," which appears at the end of his lengthy excursus on the soul; *Mafātiḥ al-ghayb*, 21:53.

subsidiary propositions. In [3.1] and [3.2] he presents rational (*‘aqlī*) and scriptural (*naqlī*) arguments against the *kalām* position that man’s true nature, or the self, resides in the body or something bodily. In [5] he affirms the Avicennian doctrine that the soul is an immaterial entity that does not occupy space. In [5.1] Rāzī lists Avicennian arguments to refute the *kalām* position that the self is a space-occupying substance (*jawhar mutaḥayyiz*). In [5.2] he presents Avicennian contentions that affirm the soul’s unity in order to counter the *kalām* position that identifies the self with the body (or something bodily).

Rāzī’s efforts to systematize rational and scriptural arguments in *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* reveal more than simply the way that he extended the scope of Sunnī *tafsīr* to include the disputed questions on the soul that had developed in the ninth through twelfth centuries. The substance of Rāzī’s debates reveal that he readily opposed central theories that were advanced by illustrious authorities within his genealogical tradition of Ash‘arism. Significantly, Rāzī uses Avicennian arguments (of Hellenistic origin) to counter core doctrinal positions that belonged to *kalām* tradition. His readiness to use Hellenistically inspired arguments to refute core doctrinal positions that his masters within the Ash‘arite tradition developed points to his autonomy as a thinker; it also shows that his commitment to Ash‘arism on central points of dispute within the Islamic intellectual tradition is tenuous.

## 5.2 THE SOUL’S QUIDDITY (MĀHIYYA) AND ITS TEMPORAL ORIGINATION (HUDŪTH)

In parts [1.1], [1.2], and [7] of his commentary on Qur’ān 17, 85 Rāzī departs from the practice of lexical analysis and the utilization of prophetic traditions and intra-Qur’ānic traditional resources to raise theoretical considerations concerning the soul. Here he raises questions concerning the soul’s true nature (*māhiyya*) and its temporal origination (*hudūth*). These sections illustrate the way that Rāzī gives philosophical meaning to Qur’ānic terms and ideas by applying his hermeneutical principle of *ta’wīl*. When I analyze these sections I try to show how Rāzī’s rational methods of exegesis are crucial to the way that he transfers ideas across disciplinary boundaries—from *falsafa* and *kalām* into Sunnī *tafsīr*.



It is Rāzī's view that the Qur'ān poses philosophical questions. It is also his view that the answers to these questions are embedded in the Qur'ān. On many occasions in *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* Rāzī implies that scripture possesses a philosophical undersense that cannot be reached using the methods of lexical, historical, and traditional exegesis. Indeed, scripture's hidden sense can be attained only by, first, discerning the philosophical question that it poses, and, second, by interpreting key Qur'ānic terms and expressions using philosophical concepts and principles.

In his commentary on Qur'ān 17, 85 Rāzī unearths philosophical questions that are embedded in the Qur'ānic expression "the spirit (*rūḥ*) belongs to my Lord's command." In his view, this expression alludes to two theoretical questions. The first concerns the spirit's quiddity (*māhiyya*) or true nature (*ḥaqīqa*). Is the spirit a space-occupying entity (*mutaḥayyiz*) or an accident inhering such an entity (*ḥāl fī-l mutaḥayyiz*), or is it neither a space-occupying entity nor an accident inhering in it? The second concerns the spirit's origination. Does the spirit preexist the body or is it temporally originated with the body?<sup>8</sup>

We can begin by noting something about the questions that Rāzī professes are posed by this Qur'ānic verse. In his view, the Qur'ān addresses the question of the life-breath or vital spirit—the primary signification of the term *rūḥ*, which is the "breath that comes and goes in the orifices of man." Thus, here Rāzī's interpretation draws on the semantic equivalence between *rūḥ* and vital spirit or life-breath. Although reading *rūḥ* to mean vital spirit or life-breath may seem like a perfectly natural interpretation, *rūḥ* in the sense of vital spirit or life-breath was not an obvious candidate for commentators. This is because, as noted by Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jauziyya (d. 751/1350), the Qur'ān does not customarily use the word *rūḥ* to refer to the human soul (or even to refer to the human being). Rather, it uses the word *nafs* (pl. *nufūs*) to refer to the human soul.<sup>9</sup> And it uses the term *rūḥ* to refer variously to (i) inspiration or revelation (*wahy*);<sup>10</sup> (ii)

8. Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 21:37.

9. "O soul at peace, return to your Lord, well-pleased, well-pleasing!" (89:27); "No! I swear by the reproachful soul" (75:2); "the soul of man incites to evil" (12:53); "Give up your soul" (6:94); "By the soul and that which shaped it and inspired it to lewdness and godfearing!" (91:7); "Every soul will taste death" (3:185; 21:35; 29:57).

10. "Even so We have revealed to you a *rūḥ* of Our affair (42:52); "casting the *rūḥ* of His affair upon whomever He will of His servants" (40:15).

power (*qūwa*), firmness (*ṭhabāt*) or support (*nuṣra*);<sup>11</sup> (iii) the angel Gabriel;<sup>12</sup> (iv) another angel;<sup>13</sup> (v) Jesus (*ʿĪsā*).<sup>14</sup>

Nonetheless, some theologians before Rāzī did interpret the term *rūḥ* to mean the vital spirit. Here are just a few examples: The Muʿtazilite theologian Jaʿfar ibn Ḥarb (d. 236/850) understood the verse within the framework of *kalām* cosmology. He posited that the term *rūḥ* refers to the life principle, and that the verse means that God did not inform man whether this principle is a substance or accident.<sup>15</sup> The Ashʿarite theologian Qushayrī (d. 465/1072) understands the term *rūḥ* to mean vital spirit (*pneuma*). Zamakhsharī, writing shortly before Rāzī, claims that the word *rūḥ* in this verse refers to the spirit that is in living things. By interpreting the word *rūḥ* to mean vital spirit (which is not necessarily the obvious interpretive option), Rāzī follows a minority reading in Islamic exegesis.

Rāzī maintains that the Qurʾān provides answers to the theoretical questions that it poses. He proposes that the Qurʾānic expression “the *rūḥ* belongs to my Lord’s command” signifies (*dalla*) two philosophical positions: (1) the vital spirit differs in quiddity from the perceptible body and from the accidents that inhere in it; and (2) the vital spirit is temporally originated with the body to which it is attached. To reach answers to these questions and attain scripture’s intended meaning, Rāzī proposes that several exegetical operations must be carried out. The first is to hypothesize that scripture’s use of the term *rūḥ* in this instance could refer to one of four possibilities and to record these doctrinal possibilities. The second is to interpret the Qurʾānic expression “the *rūḥ*

11. Those—He has written faith upon their hearts, and He has supported them with a *rūḥ* from Himself (58:22).

12. “Truly it is the revelation of the Lord of all Being, brought down by the faithful *rūḥ* upon your heart” (26:94); “Say: ‘The Holy Spirit sent it down from your Lord in truth’ (16:102).

13. “Upon the day when the *rūḥ* and the angels stand in ranks they shall speak” (78:38); “in the Night of Power the angels and the *rūḥ* descend, by the permission of their Lord, upon every command” (97:4).

14. “The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was only the Messenger of God, and His word that He committed to Mary, and a *rūḥ* from Him” (4:171).

15. Ashʿarī, *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn*, 334; Ibn Qayyim al-Jauziyya, *Kitāb al-Rūḥ*, 216–217.

belongs to my Lord's command," by giving the term *amr* the meaning of God's generation *ex nihilo*.



Now that we have described how Rāzī unearths philosophical questions that are embedded in scripture, we can now analyze his argument for the soul's true nature and its temporal origination.

Rāzī hypothesizes that the soul, which the Qurʾān refers to at 17, 85, is one of four possibilities. He then argues that only one of these can fit the scriptural understanding. The possibilities are as follows: (i) bodies inside the human frame that are generated from the mixture of the primary elements (earth, air, water, and fire) and the humors (blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile); (ii) the temperament (*mizāj*) and composition (*tarkīb*) of the body; (iii) another accident (*ʿaraḍ*) subsisting in these bodies; (iv) an existent that differs in quiddity from these bodies and accidents. In what follows, I elaborate on these theories and analyze Rāzī's exegetical argument.

Alternative (i) proposes that the bodies in the sublunar world are generated from a mixture of the four elements—earth, air, water, and fire. According to this theory, it is not possible for the body to consist of just one element, since no living body can be made of just one element—for example, a body cannot be air (to the exclusion of earth, water, and fire). The body must be a combination of the four elements, one of which always predominates. This group identifies one of the humors, namely blood, with the *rūḥ*, because when the blood leaves the body, death necessarily follows.<sup>16</sup> Others who subscribe to these assumptions hold that the elements of air and fire predominate in man.<sup>17</sup> This group identifies man's true nature with the *rūḥ*. The *rūḥ*, they argue, consists of either air-like bodies mixed with natural heat, which are generated in the heart or brain, or fire-like parts mixed with cardiac and cerebral spirits, which are natural heat.

Alternative (ii) proposes that man is a substance qualified by a certain accident. Rāzī describes this argument as follows:

The doctrine is that when the four elements (*ʿanāṣir*) are mixed together, and the force of each one is abated by the force of another, a balanced quality (*kayfiyya*

16. Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 21:37.

17. Rāzī does not specify this group, and I am unable to determine who he is referring to.

*mūʿtadila*) comes to be, and this is the temperament (*mizāj*). The degrees of this temperament are infinite, some of them are “humanity” while others are “equinity.” For humanity denotes the generated bodies qualified by the mixtures of the parts of the elements with a specific measure (*miqdār makhṣūṣ*). This is the doctrine of the multitude of the physicians and of those who deny the subsistence of the soul, and the doctrine of Abū-l Ḥusayn al-Baṣrī of the Muʿtazila.<sup>18</sup>

This doctrine, which Rāzī describes briefly, belongs to the physicians as well as Abū-l Ḥusayn al-Baṣrī. This group explains the soul using Galenic humor physiology. It maintains that the soul is an accident (*ʿaraḍ*), which is defined by the harmony of primary qualities of the hot, cold, wet, and dry. They explain the vital principle (*rūḥ*) as a mixture of blood vapor and air.

This argument for the soul’s accidental nature is rooted in the theory that everything that exists in the world of generation and corruption, including plants and animals, comes to be out of the four primary elements or qualities, which are defined as the hot, cold, wet, and dry. The term “elements” refers to the substances in which these qualities are expressed to their highest degrees, namely fire, water, air, and earth. Each element corresponds to a humor or cardinal fluid: fire corresponds to yellow bile, which is hot and dry; air corresponds to blood, which is hot and wet; water corresponds to phlegm, which is cold and wet, and earth corresponds to black bile, which is cold and dry. When the primary qualities of hot, cold, wet, and dry are properly mixed with the four humors, then a balanced mixture or temperament (*ʿitidāl al-mizāj*) is realized in the body and a healthy person is produced. Illness is the result of a quantitative or qualitative disturbance of the qualities and humors.<sup>19</sup>

According to the proponents of this theory, a person is a body qualified by a certain accident, the accident being a specific measure or harmony of the four elements.<sup>20</sup> The gradations of the measurements, which account for the difference between creatures, are infinite; one of these specific measures denotes “humanity,” while another denotes “equinity.” The soul is thus not a substance of any kind (although it is generated by substances), but simply an

18. Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 21:37.

19. M. Ullmann, *Die Medizin im Islam*, 97 and 187.

20. Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 21:37; Ashʿarī, *Maqālāt*, 335.

accident, this accident being a measurement of elements that comes to exist through a process of mixing.<sup>21</sup>

Alternative (iii) is rooted in the *kalām* system of atoms and accidents. The proponents of this alternative hold that man's true nature, or the self, is a body that is perceived by the senses, and that man is alive through the accident "life" that inheres in the body. Rāzī describes this theory tersely as follows:

The doctrine is that the term "man" denotes particular bodies on the condition that they are qualified by the attributes life, knowledge, and power; herewith life is an accident subsisting in the body. These [people] reject the spirit and the soul, and they claim that there is nothing here except united bodies qualified by these specific accidents—life, knowledge, and power. This is the doctrine of the majority of the Muʿtazilite masters. According to this doctrine, the term "man" denotes bodies qualified by life, knowledge and power, and that man is distinguished from other animals only through the form of his body and the physiognomy of his organs and his parts.<sup>22</sup>

Rāzī places this Muʿtazilite doctrine on man in the same category as the medical theory of the soul, since its proponents, like the physicians, hold that the spirit is an accident.<sup>23</sup> This theory is based on the principles of atomism that Muslim theologians conceived in Basra in the eighth and ninth centuries. According to this system, bodies are composed of atoms that in themselves do not have dimension. Only a body, which is an arrangement of atoms, has corporeality. A body receives its corporeality through the combinations of atoms with one another. God arranges atoms into a body, and in so doing, he grants the entity the accident of composition or a unity of being. God can remove the accident of composition when He wishes; when He does so, the body ceases to exist and only the atoms remain.

Alternative (iv) proposes that the soul/spirit differs in quiddity from bodies and accidents. It includes the Avicennian doctrine, which identifies the self

21. According to the practitioners of medicine, the vital spirit is not different from "life." See Ash'arī, *Maqālāt*, 335: "All of those among the physicians whose doctrines we have reported about the *rūḥ* affirm that life is the *rūḥ*."

22. Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 21:37.

23. The comparison of this *kalām* doctrine with the Galenic understanding of the spirit is superficial, since according to Galen the spirit arises from a mixture of elements, whereas for the *mutakallimūn* the spirit is an accident that God grants the body.

(*ḥaqīqat al-insān*) with the soul (*nafs*) and the soul with an immaterial substance. It also includes Rāzī's own doctrine, which posits that man's true nature is the spirit, and that the spirit is an immaterial, albeit bodily, substance.

In his exegesis of the Qur'ānic expression "the *rūḥ* belongs to my Lord's command," Rāzī rules out alternatives (i) through (iii) as candidates for scriptural meaning of the term *rūḥ*. He does this by giving distinctive meaning to this Qur'ānic expression, interpreting the term *amr* to refer to a divine act that creates the vital spirit immediately and ex nihilo. He argues that because the spirit comes into being ex nihilo, its nature must differ from bodies and their accidents. Before analyzing these crucial and major steps in Rāzī's excursus, let me provide a translation of [1.1] and [7] in which Rāzī carries out the initial operation. In [1.1] he states:

[The Jews of Medina] asked, what is the true nature of the spirit and what is its quiddity? Does it consist of bodies that are found in the interior of this body that are generated from the mixture of the natures and the humors, or does it consist of this temperament and composition itself, or does it consist of another accident subsisting in these bodies, or does it consist of an existent that differs from these bodies and accidents? God answered their question by saying that the spirit is an existent that differs from these bodies and accidents, and that is because these bodies are things that come into being from the mixture of humors and elements. But the spirit is not like this; rather, it is a simple and separate substance that comes into being only through God's creating word, "Be! And it is" (16, 40). Then they asked, why is the spirit something different from these bodies and accidents? Then God replied that it is an existent that comes into being through His command through His bringing into being and through his bringing into effect the benefit of life for this body. That we do not know the specific reality of the spirit, however, does not mean that the spirit does not exist; for, most of the realities of things and their quiddities are unknown. For, we know that oxymel has a property that reduces yellow bile; but if we want to know the quiddity of that property and its specific reality, that is unknown. Thus it is established that most of the quiddities and realities are unknown, but a denial of their existence should not follow from the fact that their being is unknown. And this is the case here, and this is what God means by His words, "You have been given only a little knowledge."<sup>24</sup>

24. Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 21:31–32.

Rāzī interprets the Qur’ānic expression “the *rūḥ* belongs to my Lord’s command” to imply that the vital spirit’s quiddity differs from the perceptible body and its accidents. He argues that if the spirit were a space-occupying entity or an accident inhering in a space-occupying entity, then it would be generated by the mixture of the bodily elements and the humors. And if so, it would be the kind of entity that undergoes change in its coming to be.

In Rāzī’s view, the Qur’ānic expression “the *rūḥ* belongs to my Lord’s command” provides evidence that the vital spirit is generated by God’s command (*amr*). He interprets the Qur’ānic term *command* (*amr*) to mean God’s command that causes things to exist by adducing the Qur’ānic phrases “and Pharaoh’s *amr* was not right-minded” (II, 97) and “when Our *amr* came” (II, 82). God’s command generates entities immediately and ex nihilo. Unlike bodily elements and humors that generate entities through a process of substantial and accidental changes, God’s command generates entities out of nothing. Now, if the vital spirit is produced by God’s command—as opposed to ingredients found in the physical world—then its quiddity must differ from the substances (and their accidents) of the natural world; its quiddity must therefore differ from the bodies and accidents.

Finally, if the spirit differs in quiddity from bodies and accidents of the natural world, as Rāzī has shown, then the remaining alternatives, namely (i), (ii), and (iii), are ruled out as candidates that explain what the vital spirit is and what scripture means when it uses the term *rūḥ* on this occasion.

Rāzī adopts a similar strategy and argument in part [7] of his excursus. He writes:

This verse signifies the correctness of what we mentioned in our commentary on it, namely: if the spirit were a body moving from one state to another and from one attribute to another, then it would be equivalent/similar to the body in its being generated from bodies which are qualified by specific attributes after being qualified by other attributes. When God’s messenger was asked about the soul it would have been necessary that he clarify that it is a body of a certain kind, and then that it became something else until it became a soul, just as he mentioned about the manner in which the human soul is generated, namely that it is a sperm-drop, then a blood clot, then an embryo. But he did not say that. Instead, he stated that, “the soul belongs to my Lord’s command,” by which he meant that

it is temporally originated and enters existence only when God says to it 'Be!' And it is (16, 40). That indicates that it is a substance that is not of the genus of bodies; rather, it is a separate, holy substance.<sup>25</sup>

Here again Rāzī establishes that the vital spirit differs in nature from material bodies. He interprets the Qur'ānic phrase "the *rūḥ* belongs to my Lord's command" to mean that (a) the vital spirit is generated by God's command (*amr*); (b) that when something is generated by God's command it comes into being *ex nihilo*—as opposed to out of prior elements.

In this selection Rāzī maintains that bodies are qualified by certain attributes and then qualified by others at a later stage. As scripture indicates elsewhere, the human body is generated from a sperm-drop, which is qualified by various different attributes, since it becomes a blood clot and then an embryo. Now, Rāzī argues that if the vital spirit were of the same substance of the human body (or one of its accidents), then the prophet would have indicated this when he was asked about the spirit's quiddity. However, when the prophet provided an answer to this question in the Qur'ānic expression "the *rūḥ* belongs to my Lord's command," he did not indicate that the vital spirit undergoes such a generative process. Rather, he indicated a process of generation *ex nihilo* by saying that the vital spirit comes into being through God's command.

For Rāzī, to say that the soul comes into existence through God's command is to say something about its origin and nature. The soul originates in the suprasensible realm, and as a result, is devoid of quantitative length and dimension. To see how this works we must turn briefly to Rāzī's cosmology.

Rāzī's cosmology harmonizes Qur'ānic terminology with fundamental Hellenistic ideas about creation. Drawing on a Platonic distinction, Rāzī's cosmology proposes that all contingent beings fall into one of two domains: the world of the senses or the world of intelligibles. Following Ghazālī and the Islamic philosophical tradition, Rāzī finds support for this cosmological distinction in scripture.<sup>26</sup> He points out that the Qur'ān couples the

25. Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 21:44.

26. Griffel notes that Ghazālī adopts the lexicon of religious vocabulary from the Arabic philosophical tradition; *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology*, 257.



terms *creation* (*khalq*) and *command* (*amr*) in the verse “Verily, His are the creation and the command” (7, 54). And he adduces this Qur’ānic citation to explain the distinction between the world of sensibles (*‘ālam al-khalq*) and intelligibles (*‘ālam al-amr*). Basing his reading on the idea that the Arabic term *khalaqa* means “to procure dimensions,” Rāzī understands this domain to comprise composite bodies that have contiguous parts and possess quantity and dimension.<sup>27</sup> He understands the term *amr* to refer to the suprasensible or intelligible world, which comprises beings that are indivisible and lack quantitative dimension.<sup>28</sup>

Like other Muslim theologians, Rāzī considers the divine process of generation through the lens of his theory of divine attributes.<sup>29</sup> Thus, to understand how contingent entities, including the soul/spirit, come into being within Rāzī’s cosmology, we must first understand Rāzī’s conception of the divine attributes. Specifically, we must grasp how the divine attributes function as instruments for the divine creative process of generation. And to do this, we must discern the philosophical nuances that Rāzī gives to the Qur’ānic terms that are central to his system of attributes.

Two Qur’ānic verses are central to Rāzī’s discussion of divine attributes: “Our command (*amr*) is but one word, as the twinkling of the eye” (54, 40) and “Verily, His are the creation and the command” (7, 54). In his exegesis of these verses, Rāzī understands Qur’ānic words, including *amr* and *khalq*, as references to two modes of divine generation through which contingent entities come to be.<sup>30</sup>

In the first mode God generates contingent entities through His divine attribute power (*qudra*). Here, the divine attribute, *power*, functions as an instrument of God’s creative activity. This attribute is directed toward the domain of creation (*khalq*). God, by means of this attribute, creates entities that are composed of bodies and accidents. This includes all living beings,

27. Rāzī, *Mafātiḥ al-ghayb*, 29:74–75. On *amr*, see Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī’s Philosophical Theology*, 256–257; Wensinck, “On the Relation between Ghazālī’s Cosmology and His Mysticism,” 200; *Encyclopedia of Islam* (second edition), 1:449–450 (S. Pines).

28. Rāzī, *Mafātiḥ al-ghayb*, 29:74–75.

29. Rāzī discusses the divine activity of generation in the controversies he held in Transoxiana; see Kholeif, *A Study on Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī*, 39–45. On God’s attributes, see “*Ṣifa*” in *Encyclopedia of Islam* (second edition), 9:551–552 (D. Gimaret and R. Talmon).

30. Rāzī, *Mafātiḥ al-ghayb*, 29:74.

vegetative bodies, minerals, the four elements, the heavens, and other bodies and their accidents.

When God generates contingent entities through His attribute, power, He does so by using material ingredients. Moreover, when God creates through His power, He does so in a three-step process of temporal succession in which he molds material into contingent entities. In the first stage, spatially extended entities are simply conglomerations of atoms. In the second stage, God combines the atoms together to give them the accident of adhesion and grants the entity magnitude. In the third stage, God provides the bodies with accidents.

In the second mode of divine generation, God creates contingent entities through His command (*amr*). Here, the divine attribute, *amr*, functions as an instrument of God's creative activity.<sup>31</sup> In contrast to the first mode through which God produces contingent entities temporally and out of material ingredients, this divine act of generation is instantaneous, and because it is instantaneous, it creates entities *ex nihilo* rather than out of prior material elements. Rāzī extracts this philosophical idea of creation through a distinctive reading of the Qur'ānic verse "Our command is but one word, as the twinkling of an eye" (54, 50). He writes:

This means that God's command is just one word, which is His word "be" (*kun*). This is the apparent, well-known meaning. In addition to this, when God wills a thing, He says to it "be!" so that here there are two things, namely His will and His speech or word (*qawl*). His will is His foreordainment (*qadar*) and His word is His decree. His word "one" carries out two matters. The first is the clarification that there is no need for Him to repeat His word; [this] is an allusion to the execution of the command; the second is the clarification of the absence of the differences of the state, so that His command in view of the creation of the great Throne is like His command in view of the creation of a tiny ant.

Rather, His command with the whole is one. God's words, "as the twinkling of an eye," is a comparison to creation (*kawn*), not a comparison to His command

31. This argument is similar to that offered by Kindī in his exegesis of Qur'ān 36:82; on Kindī's exegesis of this verse, see Janssens, "Al-Kindī: The Founder of Philosophical Exegesis," 8–10; see also Adamson, *Al-Kindī*, 62ff. For 'Āmirī, who sees the soul proceeding from the realm of universal forms, see Wakelnig, *Feder Tafel Mensch. Al-'Amiris Kitab al-Fusul fi l-Ma'alim al-ilahiya und die arabische Proklos-Rezeption im 10 Jh.*

(*amr*). For, it is as though He said, Our command is one, so that that which receives the command comes into being in the twinkling of an eye, since if it were to refer to the command, that would not be an attribute of praise appropriate for Him. The word “be!” is also a thing which He makes exist “as the twinkling of an eye.”<sup>32</sup>

In the above selection Rāzī discusses the second mode through which God generates contingent entities. When he elaborates on the Qur’ānic expression “Our command is one word” (54, 50), he proposes that the Qur’ānic term *command* denotes a single word, which is God’s decree, “be!” Moreover, he maintains that God generates entities within the domain of His command, namely the celestial intellects and entities without dimension, by uttering His decree, “be!”

When God generates contingent entities through the second mode of the divine creative activity, which is His decree, “be!,” He produces them immediately and *ex nihilo*. Rāzī implies that scripture alludes to this notion of God’s creative activity. It does so, he maintains, by anthropomorphizing this act in the expression “as the twinkling of an eye.” Here the Qur’ān intends this expression as a manner of praise for the speed of God’s creative activity of entities. Rāzī maintains that this analogy or comparison to creation is too weak to be considered a praiseworthy attribute for the divine command; what it really intends—and what he proposes is the philosophical undersense—is that when God creates through His command, He does so instantaneously, generating entities *ex nihilo*.

To summarize, Rāzī maintains that God can originate entities through His attribute of power (*qadar*). When God operates through this attribute, He directs his attention toward the domain of the sensible world. Consequently, the entities that are generated through His power possess quantity and dimension. Conversely, God can originate entities through His attribute of the command, “be!,” which functions like a divine attribute. When God operates through this attribute, He directs His attention toward the domain of the suprasensible world. Consequently, the entities that are generated through His decree are devoid of quantity and dimension. Thus, Rāzī distinguishes bodies from spirits by stating that “bodies are originated through God’s power” and

32. Rāzī, *Maḥāṭib al-ghayb*, 29:74.

“spirits are originated through God’s command.” And he understands the Qur’ānic expression “the spirit belongs to My Lord’s command” (17, 85) to mean that, because the vital spirit/soul is generated by God’s command, it is created *ex nihilo*, instantaneously, and that it is devoid of quantity and dimension.

### 5.3 THE SOUL’S RELATION TO THE BODY

Now that we have examined Rāzī’s doctrine on the soul’s nature and its temporal origination, we can turn to a further philosophical question that he addresses within the context of Qur’ānic exegesis: How is the soul related to the body?

To understand this difficulty we must turn to Rāzī’s commentary on another central Qur’ānic verse that concerns the soul: “And (when) I formed man and I breathed My spirit into him” (38, 72). This Qur’ānic verse deals with the creation and formation of man. When Rāzī elaborates on this verse and the verses that relate to it he molds a unique philosophical theory to fit the Qur’ān’s teaching on man’s formation. The philosophical theory that Rāzī adopts to explain this Qur’ānic verse was already advanced in the ninth century by Abū Ishāq al-Nazzām (d. 230/845). Van Ess has already analyzed Nazzām’s innovative cosmology and psychology. He has also, on several occasions, argued that Nazzām opposed the prevailing trends in both *falsafa* and *kalām* in the ninth century.<sup>33</sup>

In the following section I explain how Rāzī adopts key elements from Nazzām’s theory. I then describe how Rāzī adapts this theory to explain scriptural ideas about the formation of man, as well as the status of souls during sleep and death.



Nazzām was a Mu‘tazilite but a non-conformist. Like his fellow Mu‘tazilites, he was interested in interpreting physical phenomena and analyzing the ultimate constituents of the cosmos. But he proposed

33. See “Abū Eshāq al-Nazzām,” in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, 1:275–280 (J. Van Ess); “Theology and Science: the case of Abū Ishāq an-Nazzām,” 1–19. On Nazzām, see now Bennett, “Abū Ishāq al-Nazzām: The Ultimate Constituents of Nature Are Simple Properties and *Rūh*,” 207–217.

alternative views to his fellow *mutakallimūn*. His contemporaries divided basic components of the cosmos into atoms and accidents. According to this cosmology, atoms, when combined with one another, form bodies that occupy space. Accidents, including color, sound, weight, and other phenomena are transient accidents that inhere in bodies.<sup>34</sup> For the vast majority of the *mutakallimūn*, who subscribed to a cosmology of atoms and accidents, the soul is the body (or one of its atoms), or an accident inhering in the body.

Nazzām opposed the *kalām* theory of atoms and accidents as well as the *kalām* anthropology that was built on this cosmology. He held that only movement qualified as an accident. All other entities, including color, smell, and coldness, fall into the category of bodies. These corporeal ingredients “mix” or “interpenetrate” one another in such a way that they exist simultaneously in substances. To illustrate this, Nazzām adduces that oil is hidden in olives, flour in grain, and fire in flint.<sup>35</sup>

Nazzām developed his doctrine on the soul/spirit using his theory that bodies are capable of interpenetrating one another. He proposed that the vital spirit is also a body. The vital spirit, he holds, is a fine or subtle body and is identical to man’s true nature. The vital spirit also behaves like a body; it interpenetrates the dense bodily frame and exists simultaneously with other bodies. The vital spirit is identical to the soul, and it accounts for man’s identity.

Let us now examine this doctrine in more detail. In the following fragments, which survive in Ash‘arī’s *Maqālāt* and ‘Abd al-Jabbār’s *Mughnī*, we can see several key elements of Nazzām’s theory.<sup>36</sup>

- (a) Nazzām claimed that the *rūḥ* is a body; it is identical with the *naḥs*. And he claimed that the spirit (*rūḥ*) is alive through itself (*bi-naḥsihi*).<sup>37</sup>

34. For a lucid discussion of the complexity of *kalām* cosmology, see Dhanani, *The Physical Theory of Kalām: Atoms, Space, and Void in Basrian Mu‘tazili Cosmology*, passim.

35. Van Ess, “Theology and Science: the Case of Abū Ishāq an-Nazzām,” (citing *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān* of Jāḥiẓ), 9.

36. These fragments have been collected by van Ess in *Theologie und Gesellschaft*: 6:119; 6:148; 6:113.

37. Ash‘arī, *Maqālāt*, 333–334.

- (b) Naẓẓām claimed that man is living and capable of acting through himself, not through a [separate] life or a [separate] act of capability, as he claimed about the Creator.<sup>38</sup>
- (c) Naẓẓām and ‘Alī al-Uswārī claimed that man is alive and capable of acting through himself, not through a separate life or capability of acting. According to Naẓẓām, man is the *rūh*, and the *rūh* is a subtle body that penetrates this dense body.<sup>39</sup>

In the above fragments Naẓẓām presents a view on the vital spirit that opposes the interpretations proposed by his fellow *mutakallimūn*. He identifies man’s true nature with the soul, and he identifies the soul with man’s vital spirit. Moreover, he asserts that the vital spirit is self-subsistent; it is therefore unlike a transient accident that is contingent on God’s power.

By examining the following passages, we can more easily discern Naẓẓām’s position on the soul’s relation to the body.

- (a) Naẓẓām claimed that man is the *rūh*, and the *rūh* is a subtle body that penetrates through this compact body, which man sees and feels. It is also the **active principle**, not the compact body.<sup>40</sup>
- (b) It was reported about Naẓẓām that he claimed that man is the *rūh*, and that the *rūh* is life, which is **interconnected** with this body; it is in the body in the manner of penetration. It is a single substance, which does not alter and does not have a contrary. It is capable of acting and living and knowing through itself.<sup>41</sup>
- (c) Naẓẓām claimed: man is the *rūh*; but this *rūh* penetrates the body and is interconnected with it. All of the one is in all of the other. The body is a defect and a prison for it and compresses it. Zurqān reported about him that the *rūh* is the **sensing and perceiving organ**; it is a single part, neither light nor darkness.<sup>42</sup>
- (d) Then Qāḍī ‘Abd al-Jabbār reported about Naẓẓām that man is a subtle body mixed with this dense body and takes on its form, so that something

38. Ash‘arī, *Maqālāt*, 487.

39. Ash‘arī, *Maqālāt*, 229.

40. Ka‘bī, *Maqālāt al-Islamiyyin*, 70; van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft*, 6:112.

41. ‘Abd al-Jabbār, *Mughnī*, 11:310; 11:339; van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft*, 6:113.

42. Ash‘arī, *Maqālāt*, 331.

of what makes man man is in each part of the body. Thus if a part of the body is cut off then what is in him contracts to the rest of the body. When, however, it can no longer contract, he dies. This is the path that Abū Bakr al-Iskhshīd follows, though others before him believed in it.<sup>43</sup>

From these excerpts we can extract several points that are central to Naẓẓām's theory of the vital spirit and the spirit's relation to the body. The first of these concerns the vital spirit's true nature. According to Naẓẓām, the vital spirit differs in nature from the material body to which it is attached; it is a subtle, immaterial, and unextended body, and therefore unlike the compact and dense body that it inhabits.

The second point is that the vital spirit is capable of interpenetrating the compact and dense body that houses it. Because the vital spirit is subtle and unextended, it is capable of interpenetrating the body and diffusing itself throughout the body in such a way that "all of the one is in all of the other." This point is made in excerpt (c). The vital spirit is thus not localized in a bodily part—say the arm or the leg—but is like vapor or a gaseous substance that inhabits all of its parts.

Naẓẓām's theory betrays the influence of Stoic philosophy. The Stoics used several metaphors to describe the way that the spirit interpenetrates the body. One theory posited that the spirit and body are mixed through and through so that their substances perish with each other and a new body is generated from their mixture, just as medical drugs are mixed and a new substance is generated from their mixture. A second theory posited that spirit and body are mixed through and through, but that they preserve their own substances, as fire passes through iron. A third theory proposed that spirit and body are mixed like beans and grains of wheat—that their substances are not mixed through and through but retain their natures.<sup>44</sup>

## 5.4 RĀZĪ'S DOCTRINE ON THE VITAL SPIRIT

Rāzī adopts the main elements of Naẓẓām's theory of the vital spirit and its relation to the body. In *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* he molds it to fit the Qur'ān's ideas about the formation and creation of man.

43. Ibn Mattawayh, *Kitāb al-Majmū' fi l-Muḥīṭ bi-l Taklīf*, 2:248; van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft*, 6:114–115.

44. On this subject, see Sorabji, *Matter, Space and Motion*, 79–85.

Rāzī acknowledges the validity of the main elements of Naẓẓām's theory. He maintains that the vital spirit is a subtle substance that interpenetrates the body by being diffused throughout it. One of the new elements he adds concerns the stuff or material out of which the soul is composed. As we shall see later, Rāzī maintains that the soul's substance consists of luminous, indissoluble bodies that inhabit all parts of the human frame. Because the ingredients of the soul are derived from the celestial or divine realm, they are indissoluble. As a result, the soul is separable from the human frame and continues to exist after the corruption of that frame.<sup>45</sup> In what follows I translate the relevant passages I have gathered from Rāzī's oeuvre and then turn to the strategic methods that Rāzī uses to forge his doctrine.

- (a) God alludes to the soul (*nafs*) with His words, "And when I breathed into him from My spirit." When He (God) brought the spirit (*rūḥ*) into relation with Himself, He indicated that the spirit (*rūḥ*) is a holy, elevated, noble substance. The *ḥulūliya* believe that the word "from" (*min*) indicates partition. This mistakenly assumes that the spirit (*rūḥ*) is one of the parts of God, but this is the utmost in falsity; for everything which has a part and a whole is composite and is contingent in existence due to itself and is temporally originated. As for the mode of that breathing from the spirit, know that its most exact meaning is that the soul's substance (*jawhar al-nafs*) consists of luminous, translucent bodies, which are of heavenly elements and holy in substance. These bodies flow in the body as light flows through air and fire in charcoal. This much is known, but only God knows the mode of that breathing.<sup>46</sup>
- (b) Some people hold that the "spirit" (*rūḥ*) consists of subtle, celestial, luminous bodies from the substance of the nature of the sun's light, and that they are not receptive of dissolution or alternation, and that they do not receive separation or breaking apart. For, when the body comes into being and its preparation is completed—and this is what God means by the words, "And (when) I formed man"—those divine, celestial, noble bodies penetrate the interior of the organs of the body, as fire permeates coal, and as sesame oil permeates sesame and as the water of a flower permeates the body of a flower. And the diffusion of those celestial bodies through the substance of the body is what

45. Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 26:199; 21:37; 21:38; idem, *Kitāb al-Arbā'in*, 266; idem, *Kitāb al-Nafs wa-l rūḥ*, 46.

46. Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 26:199.



God means by the expression, “And I breathed My spirit into him.” Thus as long as the body remains healthy, receptive of the permeation of those noble bodies, it remains alive. But when thick humors come to be in the body, those thick humors prevent the diffusion of those noble bodies in them, and they separate from the body, then death occurs. This is a strong, noble doctrine; it is necessary to consider it, for it is in strong harmony with what the divine books have transmitted about the states of life and death.<sup>47</sup>

- (c) Thābit ibn Qurra (d. 288/901) affirmed [the existence of] the soul (*nafs*); he held that it is dependent on subtle luminous, celestial bodies that do not receive generation or corruption, or separation or breaking apart, and [he held] that those bodies flow in the [human] body, and that as long as that flowing subsists, the soul remains the manager of the body, but when those subtle bodies separate from the substance of the body, the attachment of the soul to the body comes to an end.<sup>48</sup>
- (d) We hold that souls are bodies that are subtle in themselves, alive in themselves. When these bodies associated with this bodily frame (*haykal*), flowing in it as rosewater flows in the leaves of roses, fire in charcoal, and sesame oil in the body of sesame, this bodily frame becomes alive by reason of this association. Melting, dissolution and change find no way into these subtle and living bodies, but only to the bodily frame. Thus as long as the organs and humors remain receptive of the flow of those subtle bodies which are alive in themselves in them, this physical frame remains alive. But when those organs and humors are no longer receptive, those subtle bodies separate from them, and that is death.<sup>49</sup>
- (e) God said: “And [when] I formed man and breathed into him from My spirit” means that He distinguished between the act of forming man (*al-taswiya*) and the breathing from His spirit (*nafkh al-rūh*). Formation refers to the act of creating of the parts and organs and to the setting in order of the temperament (*mizāj*) and the genital sperm and blood. When He distinguished the breathing from His spirit from the act of forming, then He attached (*rūh*) to Himself, and this indicates that the *rūh* is a noble substance, and that it is not of the genus of the body that is perceived by the senses.<sup>50</sup>

47. Rāzī, *Mafātīh al-ghayb*, 21:37.

48. Rāzī, *Mafātīh al-ghayb*, 21:38. On Thābit ibn Qurra, see “Thābit b. Kurra,” *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 10: 428–429 (R. Rashed and R. Morelon).

49. Rāzī, *Kitāb al-Arbāʿīn*, 266.

50. Rāzī, *Kitāb al-Nafs wa-l rūh*, 46.

We should begin by noting that Rāzī was not the first Muslim intellectual to use a philosophical theory of the soul to explain this Qurʾānic verse. Before him, Avicenna had considered the verse an occasion to read a philosophical theory into scripture.<sup>51</sup> He read his dualistic theory of soul and body into this verse. In his reading, the Qurʾānic expression “And (when) I formed man” refers to the body’s preparation to receive a rational soul. In his system, this means that God prepares the temperament (*mizāj*) of the body so that it has the appropriate disposition to receive a rational soul from the Active Intelligence. The Qurʾānic phrase “from My spirit” indicates that the soul is a separate substance and not a body or anything bodily.<sup>52</sup> Because the soul is generated from God’s spirit, and God’s spirit is a non-bodily substance, the rational soul is also a substance divorced from matter.

To Rāzī, the Qurʾānic verse “And (when) I formed man and I breathed My spirit into him,” refers to a two-step process through which God fashions man. Rāzī understands the Qurʾānic phrase “And (when) I formed man” to refer to the act through which God forms the material body. In Rāzī’s exegesis, this means that God sets the material body in order so that it becomes prepared to receive a rational soul (*al-naḥs al-nāṭiqā*). God mixes the humors of the body—blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile, which are generated from the primary qualities of the hot, wet, dry, and cold—so that a specific measure (*miqdār makḥṣūṣ*) is realized in the body. This specific measure is a balanced quality or harmony of mixture that gives the body its disposition to receive a rational soul.<sup>53</sup>

Rāzī understands the Qurʾānic expression “And I breathed into man from My spirit” to refer to a second act through which God creates the soul’s substance (*jawhar al-naḥs*). In this act God infuses the bodily frame (*haykal*) with the soul. The origin of the spirit is divine; this gives it a quiddity that is generically different from the bodily frame and its parts. The substance of this divinely implanted soul differs in quiddity from its bodily frame and physical

51. Avicenna, *Risālah fī Maʿrifat al-naḥs al-nāṭiqā wa-aḥwālīhā*, 181–192. The attribution of this treatise to Avicenna has been questioned by Michot, who suggests that an author inspired by Avicennian ideas composed the treatise in the one hundred or one hundred and fifty years following his death. See “L’épître sur la connaissance de l’âme rationnelle et de ses états” attribué à Avicenne. Presentation et essai de traduction,” 480–481.

52. Avicenna, *Risālah fī Maʿrifat al-naḥs al-nāṭiqā wa-aḥwālīhā*, 185.

53. Rāzī, *Maḥāṭib al-ghayb*, 26:199; 24:124.

parts. That the soul differs in quiddity from the body and its physical parts is indicated by Rāzī's use of the terms *noble*, *divine*, and *subtle* to describe the soul in (a), (b), and (d). These terms, although they may appear to be mere eulogy, actually indicate what Rāzī thinks the "stuff" of the soul is—the soul's quiddity as a divine and luminous substance that is generated from God's spirit. Rāzī understands God's reference to His spirit in the Qur'ānic expression "My spirit" to mean that God attaches the *rūḥ* to Himself with the result that the *rūḥ* is a divine substance. He then understands the expression "And I breathed into man" to mean that the human soul is generated from God's spirit, which differs in quiddity from material bodies.

The second point that Rāzī reads into this Qur'ānic verse is that the soul is an immaterial, indissoluble body. This is implied by the terms Rāzī uses to describe the "stuff" out of which the spirit is composed. In (a) Rāzī asserts that the spirit is made of "luminous, translucent bodies" from "the heavenly elements"; and in (b) he asserts that the spirit is composed of "subtle, celestial, luminous bodies from the substance of the nature of the sun's light, and that they are not receptive of dissolution or alternation, and that they do not receive separation or breaking apart." Finally, in (e) he asserts that the spirit is "not of the genus of the body that is perceived by the senses." For Rāzī, it is because the spirit is descended from a celestial origin that it is composed of luminous, translucent bodies. The spirit, being an extract of the heavens/celestial world that is penetrated by God's light, derives its quiddity/attributes of indissolubility and unity from that luminous substance.

The final philosophical point that Rāzī builds into his exegesis of Qur'an 38:72 is also reminiscent of the Stoic theory that was adopted by Naẓẓām. This point concerns the spirit's relation to the bodily frame and can be aptly termed a theory of infusion and diffusion. The idea here is that the soul's fine nature (i.e. its luminous substance) is infused into the body and diffused throughout it. The metaphors Rāzī employs to illustrate the manner in which the soul's luminous substance relates to its bodily frame are all used by Stoic philosophers who held that spirit and body are mixed through and through.<sup>54</sup>

54. See the translation by Long and Sedley in *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 1:290–294.

In early Islamic theology, Naẓẓām appears to have adopted the basic idea that the spirit is mixed with the body in such a way that it interpenetrates (*mudākhalā*) its parts while retaining its nature.

The metaphors Rāzī utilizes are intended to explain how the soul, whose substance consists of translucent bodies, is thoroughly mixed with the body in such a way that it retains its own nature. When speaking of the soul's translucent bodies, Rāzī states in excerpt (a) that "these bodies flow in the body as light flows through air and fire in charcoal." In passage (b) he understands the Qur'ānic phrase "And I breathed My spirit into him" to mean that God infuses the spirit's substance into the interior organs of the body in such a way that "fire permeates coal, and as sesame oil permeates sesame and as the water of a flower permeates the body of a flower and as the water of a flower permeates the body of a flower." And in passage (d) he describes this using a similar metaphor, stating that the spirit flows in the bodily frame as rosewater flows in the leaves of roses, fire in charcoal, and sesame oil in the body of sesame.

## 5.5 THE SOUL'S SEPARABILITY: SLEEP AND DEATH

Just as Rāzī draws on his theory of the soul/spirit to explain scriptural teachings on man's formation and creation, he also calls on it to explain scriptural ideas about the soul's status during sleep and death. Here again we see Rāzī importing philosophical ideas into scriptural commentary as a means of resolving difficulties in Qur'ānic exegesis. The exegetical difficulty I am referring to develops out of two Qur'ānic verses. One of these addresses the state of the soul during death; the other addresses the state of the soul during sleep. The first verse is Qur'ān 39, 42, which reads as follows:

God takes the souls at the time of their death, and those which have not yet died in their sleep, He withholds that against which He has decreed death, but He lets go of others until their appointed time of death.

The second verse is Qur'ān 6, 60, which reads as follows:

It is He that raises you (unto Him) in the night, and He knows what you do by day; then He resurrects you up therein, so that an appointed term may be

determined; then unto Him shall you return, then He will tell you of what you have been doing.

In the former verse, the Qurʾān implies that sleep and death are similar experiential states for the soul.<sup>55</sup> In the latter verse the Qurʾān implies that God relocates the soul at its death by removing it from the body and raising it unto Himself. Böwering has already noted that this exegetical difficulty was noted and discussed in Sufi exegesis in the ninth century.<sup>56</sup> The problem that Rāzī identifies here can be formulated succinctly as follows: How can the soul's experiential state of sleep be similar to death if one remains alive during sleep?

When Rāzī approaches this verse, he draws upon his stand-by exegetical method of the *taʾwīl*, his standby for verses that seemed to lend themselves to philosophical interpretation. In his exegesis Rāzī supplies an inferior and a superior interpretation, calling the latter a "clarification that exceeds the former." While the inferior interpretation accepts the plain or apparent sense of the verse, the superior interpretation draws on Rāzī's theory of the soul, which we have detailed previously, to explain the experiential states of the soul during wakefulness, sleep, and death. The inferior reading, which forms the first part of Rāzī's exegesis of Qurʾān 39, 42, runs as follows:

The meaning of this verse is that God takes the souls at death and during sleep, except that he seizes the souls for which he decrees death, while he lets go those that are asleep until an appointed time, that is, until a time for which he set their death. His words, "God takes souls at the time of their death" means that He takes the souls which he causes to die at death and he seizes them and does not return them to bodies. His words, "He lets go others until their appointed time of death" (*ajal musammā*) mean that he returns the souls which he takes during sleep to the body when it wakes and it remains in this state until its appointed time, which is the time of its death. This interpretation of the verse corresponds to the truth.<sup>57</sup>

55. This idea is originally biblical; see the entry under "Soul" in *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, 11:751 (George A. Barton).

56. Böwering, *Mystical Vision*, 241–246.

57. Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 26:284.

Rāzī recognizes the interpretation that relies on the veracity of the apparent sense of the verse as a valid. He maintains that the experiential states of sleep and death are similar; during both of these states God withdraws the soul by pulling it out of the body unto Himself. In the case of sleep, however, He returns the soul to the body until its appointed time of death.<sup>58</sup>

It is the superior interpretation, in which Rāzī elaborates upon this verse, that exemplifies the way that Rāzī molds philosophical ideas into scriptural commentary. What Rāzī does is to interpret this verse through the lens of his theory on the spirit (and its relation to the body). Rāzī states:

But there is a more perfect explanation. We hold that the human soul (*al-nafs al-insāniyya*) is an expression for a spiritual, luminous substance. When it is attached to the body, its light is realized in all of its parts, and this is the state of life. We hold that at the time of death, its attachment is separated from the exterior body as well as its interior and that is death. But during sleep, its light is separated from the exterior of the body in some ways, while its light is not separated from the interior of the body. Thus it is established that death and sleep are of the same genus, although death is a complete separation while sleep is not a complete separation. Now that this is established, it is clear that the Powerful, Knowing, Wise [God] arranges the attachment of the soul's substance to the body in three ways. The first is that the light of the soul is located in all parts of the body, both its exterior and interior—and that is wakefulness. The second is that the light of the soul is lifted from the exterior of the body in some ways, but not its interior, and that is sleep. The third is that the light of the soul is removed from the body in its totality, and that is death. Thus it is established that death and sleep participate in the being of one another as a death of the soul.<sup>59</sup>

It is by applying the exegetical device of *ta'wīl* that Rāzī resolves the difficulty posed by exegetes concerning the soul's status during sleep and death. Rāzī's solution to the problem of the similarity of these states is premised on the ideas that he argued for earlier in his exegesis of the Qur'ānic expression,

58. On this expression, see Abrahamov, "The Appointed Time of Death According to 'Abd al-Jabbār," 7–38.

59. Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 26:284.

“And (when) I formed man and I breathed My spirit into him” (38, 72). In his exegesis of this central Qur’ānic verse, Rāzī had established that the spirit (*rūḥ*) is a luminous substance that penetrates the compact body and is diffused throughout it. He had also established that the spirit (*rūḥ*) is a luminous substance, due to its inalterability indissolubility, is separable from its bodily frame.

Rāzī approaches this exegetical difficulty by effectuating his theory of body-spirit dualism. This theory, as I shall explain, supposes that “life” is a relationship that is characterized by the spirit’s attachment to the body. Rāzī maintains that the bodily frame (*haykal*) is “lifeless, dense and dark” and serves as a receptacle for the spirit.<sup>60</sup> The bodily frame is composed of organs and humors that receive the flow of the spirit. The organs and humors are responsible for maintaining the diffusion of light throughout the body in such a way that light is realized in all of the body’s parts. The body remains alive as long as organs and humors remain receptive of the flow of the spirit. In this condition, the spirit resides in its bodily receptacle and is diffused throughout its interior organs and humors.

Just as Rāzī defines life as a relationship between the spirit and body, he also defines wakefulness, sleep, and death as relationships of attachment between the spirit and body. Rāzī proposes that wakefulness is a state in which the spirit is wholly attached to its bodily frame. In this condition of complete attachment, the spirit is diffused throughout its exterior organs, humors, as well as its interior parts—the five senses—in such a way that “traces of [the spirit’s] light” appear in the five senses.<sup>61</sup>

Rāzī maintains that sleep, too, is a distinctive relationship shared by the spirit and its bodily frame. He argues that during sleep, the spirit’s luminous substance is partially separated from the body. When he elaborates on this relationship, he states that during sleep the spirit is diffused in the body in such a way that it retreats from the organs and humors to the interior.<sup>62</sup> In this condition, the spirit’s luminous substance is separated from the exterior of the body—meaning its organs and humors—so that the external senses are suspended from their activities. A person in such a state remains alive

60. Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 19:219.

61. Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 19:219.

62. Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 13:12–13.

(and retains his nature). This is because the spirit, which consists of luminous bodies, is only partially diffused; these remain in the interior of the body, so that the internal senses stay active.

Rāzī defines death as a third relationship shared by the spirit and its bodily frame. At death the spirit is completely separated from the body in which it is housed. Death occurs when the bodily organs and humors that served as the spirit's receptacle no longer have the capacity to hold the indissoluble substance that is the spirit. When elaborating on this condition, Rāzī states that these organs and humors become too thick or dense to retain the spirit, and that when they become this way, they prevent the fine luminous bodies of the spirit's substance from flowing throughout the organs and humors. At this stage the spirit becomes fully separated from the body.

Let us now return to the exegetical difficulty that Rāzī confronts. How are the experiential states of sleep and death similar? According to Rāzī's exegesis, death is a complete relocation of the soul. The Qur'ānic expression "God takes souls at the time of their death" means that at death God seizes the spirit's luminous substance in its entirety from the body's organs and humors. Sleep, Rāzī proposes in his exegesis, is similar to death in that it, too, is a relocation of the soul. But spirit and body, Rāzī maintains, can have various relationships of attachment. One of these is a relationship in which the spirit retreats to the internal senses and retains its function of the vital spirit. This kind of relocation can only be explained, Rāzī thought, by drawing on the Naẓẓām's long-forgotten theory of body-spirit dualism.

## 5.6 THE PROPHET'S SOUL

In the following section I delve deeper into Rāzī's theory of the soul (and deeper into his rational methods of exegesis) by examining his conception of the prophet's soul in *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*. I propose that Rāzī discovers a model of the soul's intellectual and moral perfection embedded in the Qur'ān's method of reasoning. I argue that, in his view, this model assumes rational principles that Avicenna developed and ideas that Ghazālī formulated in his autobiography. In my analysis I try to show that when Rāzī explains the Qur'ān's model of the prophet's soul, he exploits principles and ideas that he had developed in his works of *falsafa* and *kalām*. By showing how Rāzī transfers such principles and ideas across disciplinary boundaries—from *falsafa* and *kalām*



into Sunnī *tafsīr*—I underscore that his ideas about the soul’s perfection can be understood only against the backcloth of his rational method of Qur’ānic interpretation; and I emphasize that his rational method of Qur’ānic interpretation is crucial to the way that he adapts the worldview of Sunnī *tafsīr* to the intellectual developments that took place in *kalām* and *falsafa*.

Shihadeh has given the field an entry into this area by illustrating that Rāzī’s conception of the prophet’s soul betrays an Avicennian philosophical influence. In his monograph on Rāzī’s ethics, Shihadeh proposes that Rāzī adopts a teleological approach to prophecy in his works from *Mafātiḥ al-ghayb* onward (including *Ma‘ālim* and *Ma‘ālib*). He establishes that, in Rāzī’s view, a person attains happiness when his soul reaches its perfection; and that the soul attains perfection by refining its theoretical and practical faculties. Having refined these faculties, the prophet possesses the ability to perfect the souls of those individuals who are imperfect (*takmil al-nāqishin*). Shihadeh furthermore argues that Rāzī conceived of prophecy “in terms of attributes that are essential to the prophet himself” and that according to this conception, “the existence of the prophet is necessary by virtue of what he is and does.”<sup>63</sup>

In what follows I build on Shihadeh’s hypothesis by showing how Rāzī discovers a teleological model of prophecy embedded in the Qur’ān’s method of reasoning, and by illustrating that the Qur’ānic paradigm of the prophet’s soul conforms to the rational conception of prophecy that Rāzī formulates in his works of philosophy (*falsafa*) and theology (*kalām*). I try to show that, in Rāzī’s exegesis, the essence of prophecy is implied by the Qur’ān’s pattern of reasoning at 10, 58.<sup>64</sup> In his view, this verse communicates the process of the soul’s intellectual and moral development, and it also substantiates Muḥammad’s intellectual and moral perfection.

63. Shihadeh, *The Teleological Ethics*, 135. On prophecy in Islam, see Rahman’s foundational work: *Prophecy in Islam. Philosophy and Orthodoxy*, passim. See also Griffel, “Muslim philosophers’ rationalist explanations of Muḥammad’s prophecy,” 158–179; idem, “Al-Gazali’s Concept of Prophecy: The Introduction of Avicennian Psychology Into Aṣ‘arite Theology,” 101–144; Marmura, “Avicenna’s Psychological Proof of Prophecy,” 46–56; Abrahamov, “Religion *versus* Philosophy: The Case of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī’s Proofs of Prophecy,” 415–425; “Nubuwwa” in *Encyclopedia of Islam* (second edition), 8:93–97 (T. Fahd).

64. For further examples that illustrate how the Qur’ān serves as a blueprint for various aspects of spiritual life, see Lagarde, *Les secrets de l’invisible*, 425–559.

To understand how Rāzī shows that the Qur'ān's method of reasoning is congruous with his teleological conception of the prophet's soul we must first turn to a distinction that he draws between two kinds of proofs that are foundational to his conception of prophecy: a demonstration *that* something exists (*burhān inna*) and a demonstration *why* something exists (*burhān limā*). The distinction between *burhān inna* and *burhān limā* goes back to Aristotle, and it was adopted by the *falāsifa* in their works of logic.<sup>65</sup> In his exegesis, Rāzī implies that both kinds of proofs are lodged in the Qur'ān. He holds that the Qur'ān alludes to a demonstration *that* prophecy exists, and that such a demonstration confirms Muḥammad's status as a prophet. In a demonstration *that*, one infers the cause from its effect; in this case, one infers that Muḥammad is a truthful prophet by the miracles that he performs. For Rāzī, the following verse alludes to the Qur'ān's miraculous nature: *This Qur'ān could not have been forged apart from God; but it is a confirmation of what is before it, and a distinguishing of the Book, wherein is no doubt, from the Lord of all Being* (10, 37). He implies that this verse confirms Muḥammad's status as a prophet by referring to the delivery of the Qur'ān, which is Muḥammad's miracle.

It is Rāzī's view that the Qur'ān also alludes to a demonstration of *why* prophecy exists by providing a causal explanation of prophecy. In a demonstration *why*, one infers the effect from the cause; one infers why Muḥammad is a prophet by grasping the essence of prophecy, which is the aptitude to perfect the souls of others, and by grasping that Muḥammad's acts and moral conduct confirm his ability to perfect the souls of other human beings.<sup>66</sup>

Unlike many earlier Muslim theologians, Rāzī appreciated the crucial distinction between the *burhān al-innā* and the *burhān limā*.<sup>67</sup> In the *Muḥaṣṣal*, which dates to his early or middle career, Rāzī distinguishes between the proof from miracles and the proof that relies on [Muḥammad's] "morals, actions, rules of conduct, and his life."<sup>68</sup> In the *Ma'ālim* and the *Maṭālib*

65. Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*, I, 13, 78a22–79a15; Shihadeh, *The Teleological Ethics*, 136. On the distinction between *burhān limā* and *burhān inna*, see Marmura, "Ghazali and Demonstrative Science," 188–193; see also the entry under "Al-Burhān" in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 1: 1326–1327 (ED.).

66. Shihadeh, *The Teleological Ethics*, 135–136.

67. That Rāzī brings this distinction into play when he discusses prophecy is noted by Abrahamov in "Religion versus Philosophy. The Case of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's Proofs for Prophecy" (424–425).

68. Rāzī, *Muḥaṣṣal*, 351; Shihadeh, 133–134.

(which date to his late career) Rāzī also relies on the proof from miracles when he attempts to substantiate Muḥammad's prophethood.<sup>69</sup> In both the latter texts he implies that according to the second method, one infers that Muḥammad is a prophet by grasping that his sayings, teachings, and actions perfect people's souls by influencing them positively.<sup>70</sup>

In *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* Rāzī explains the nature of the prophet's soul by building on the models of prophecy that he constructs in his rational works of theology and philosophy. In this work he draws a distinction between the two demonstrations of prophecy that I have described above (*burhān al-innā* and *burhān limā*); and furthermore, he proposes that these demonstrations can be discovered in certain Qur'ānic verses. In Rāzī's view, the highest ranking, loftiest, and most perfect demonstration for prophecy is the teleological proof that is embedded in Qur'an 10, 58: *O men, now there has come to you an admonition from your Lord, and a healing for what is in the hearts, and a guidance and a mercy to the believers.*<sup>71</sup> The teleological proof that Rāzī finds in this Qur'ānic verse relies on several principles that Ghazālī had formulated when he provided an alternative to the proof from miracles. According to Ghazālī, one can infer from an individual's life and moral characteristics whether he is endowed with intellectual and moral perfection; and the intellectual and moral perfection of prophets is evinced in their ability to develop the souls of ordinary men by instructing them in devotional practices.<sup>72</sup>

Since Rāzī augments and refines Ghazālī's line of reasoning, it will be helpful to provide a bit more of the Ghazālīan background to the paradigm of the prophet's soul that he builds in *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*. In his article on intellectual autobiographies, Menn has shown that when Ghazālī argues for the veracity

69. Shihadeh (*The Teleological Ethics*, 10) proposes that the *Ma'ālīm* dates to the end of Rāzī's career. The *Maṭālib* (as noted by Shihadeh, 10–11) dates to 603/1207–605/1208–1209.

70. Shihadeh, *The Teleological Ethics*, 133–135. Rāzī also makes this argument in *Maṭālib*, 8:61–64.

71. Trans. Arberry.

72. In Western scholarship this is first pointed out by Menn in "The Discourse on the Method and the Tradition of Intellectual Autobiography," 141–191. See now also Griffel and Hachmeier, "Prophets as Physicians for the Soul: A Dispute About the Relationship Between Reason and Revelation Reported by al-Tawḥīdī in his *Book of Delightful and Intimate Conversations* (*Kitāb al-Imtā' wa-l-mu'ānasa*)," 223–257. On prophecy in Ghazālī's thought

of Muḥammad's prophethood, he analogizes prophecy to medicine by postulating that prophets serve as "physicians of the heart." Ghazālī maintains that recognizing a prophet is much like recognizing a proficient physician's medical prescriptions. Just as one can recognize a proficient physician by testing his medical prescriptions, so also one can recognize a veritable prophet by testing his prescriptions for religious ritual. He further reasons that in the same way that divine inspiration may be ascribed to a proficient physician whose treatments are effective, prophecy (or divine inspiration) may be ascribed to a person whose prescriptions for religious ritual and devotional practices are effective.<sup>73</sup> Ghazālī thus expects his reader to infer Muḥammad's truthfulness as a prophet (and hence his credibility) from the knowledge that his prescriptions for religious ritual and devotional practices, which are embodied in ḥadīth literature, produce their desired result of perfecting the soul and guiding it to God.

When Rāzī interprets Qur'ān 10, 58 he defines prophecy as the soul's intellectual and moral perfection, and he presents Muḥammad as a prophet-physician who is endowed with the aptitude to perfect the souls of ordinary people.<sup>74</sup> Now, to understand how Rāzī systematizes such philosophical ideas into Sunnī *tafsīr*, and to understand how he finds them embedded in the Qur'ān's method of reasoning, we must first identify the philosophical principles that Rāzī inherits from Avicenna and show how he puts them use in his rationalistic works. Indeed, it is only by understanding such principles that we will be able to grasp how, within his system of thought, Qur'ān 10, 58 provides a model of the soul's perfection and corroborates Muḥammad's intellectual and moral perfection.



In his works of theology (*kalām*) and philosophy (*falsafa*) Rāzī builds a teleological model of prophecy that assumes key Avicennian principles. Arguing along Avicennian lines, he proposes that an attribute which exists

more generally, see Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology*, especially 67–70; 100–101, and 194–201; Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, 94–99.

73. On divine inspiration in Ghazālī's theology, see Treiger, *Inspired Knowledge in Islamic Thought*, 64–80.

74. Shihadeh, *The Teleological Ethics*, 142.

in deprivation also exists in perfection by necessity.<sup>75</sup> In both the *Mabāḥith* and the *Maṭālib* Rāzī accedes to this principle when he discusses the rational soul. In the former work, which mainly follows the Avicennian tradition, he does this in the course of discussing the intellect's aptitude to acquire theoretical knowledge. Rāzī writes:

Since we observe that the degrees of this [the intellect's] aptitude differ in power and weakness or smallness and greatness, it is likely that there exists a rational soul that extends to the furthest degree of power and quickness of aptitude when it apprehends the true natures of things such that this person apprehends knowledge of things without trying or wanting.<sup>76</sup>

Rāzī makes a similar argument in his late theological compendium, the *Maṭālib*:

We have shown that perfection and imperfection occur in all people to various degrees and disparate levels. Therefore, just as we are able to see individuals who have reached great proximity to cattle and beasts in imperfection, stupidity, and heedlessness, so also on the side of perfection, there will have to exist perfect and virtuous individuals. There will necessarily exist among them an individual who is the most perfect and virtuous of them. He will be at the highest ranks of humanity and the initial stages of angelhood.<sup>77</sup>

In these selections Rāzī adopts Avicenna's argument for the necessity of prophecy. In the *Mabāḥith*, he argues that the intellect's capacity to attain theoretical knowledge is unequally distributed among human beings. Because such a capacity exists potentially in some human beings, it is likely that this attribute exists in others "to

75. Griffel, "Al-Ġazālī's Concept of Prophecy," 109–110. For a discussion of this principle, see Marmura's analysis of Avicenna's argument for the necessity of prophecy in "Avicenna's Psychological Proof of Prophecy," 46–56.

76. Rāzī, *Al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya*, 1:474. I analyze this passage in more detail in chapter four: Interpreting the Intellect and Light. On the role of the *Mabāḥith* in the later Islamic philosophical tradition, see Eichner, "Dissolving the Unity of Metaphysics: From Fakhr al-Din al-Rāzī to Mulla Sadra al-Shirāzī," 139–197.

77. I have mainly followed Shihadeh's translation in *The Teleological Ethics* (138). The importance of this argument in Rāzī's thought is first pointed out by Abrahamov in "Religion versus Philosophy," 419.

the furthest degree,”—as a perfection in other human beings. For Rāzī, the appropriate appellation for the rational soul when it functions at its highest level is the “sacred prophetic faculty.” In the *Maṭālib*, he follows a similar line of reasoning. He proposes that the soul’s moral perfection is unequally distributed among people; and that because moral perfection exists as a privation in some creatures (e.g., cattle and beasts), it exists by necessity as a perfection in prophets. In *Mafātiḥ al-ghayb* too Rāzī presents the prophet’s soul as intellectually and morally perfect. Here he implies that because the prophet is endowed with intellectual and moral perfection, he has the aptitude to perfect the souls of ordinary folk. Rāzī appeals to the prophetic tradition, “the scholars of my community are like the prophets of the Israelites,” to show that souls vary in their aptitudes to morally perfect others. He then divides human beings into three categories: (1) morally imperfect; (2) morally perfect but lacking in the capacity to perfect others; (3) morally perfect who are endowed with the capacity to bring others to perfection.<sup>78</sup>

When Rāzī composed his Qur’ān commentary he combined the above Avicennian principles with Ghazālīan ideas to explain the prophet’s intellectual and moral perfection. Adopting Ghazālī’s line of reasoning, Rāzī proposes that just as illness can befall the body, it can also befall the soul. The soul’s illness is caused by its generation in the temporal world and its immersion in the body—two occurrences that incline the soul toward sensual pleasures and gratification. Explaining these ideas in *Mafātiḥ al-ghayb*, Rāzī writes that a “soul forms an attachment to [its] body” as a result of its natural desire for the body, and that such an attachment and immersion in the body is “a cause for the acquisition of false beliefs and blameworthy morals in the substance of the soul.”<sup>79</sup> Further, he reasons that although the soul becomes ill when “false beliefs and blameworthy morals” take root in it, its intellectual and moral depravity can be cured by a prophet, who like a proficient physician with knowledge of medicine and prescriptions, possesses prescriptions for religious ritual. Such prescriptions can move the soul from sickness to health by inculcating it with correct beliefs and praiseworthy morals.

Building on the theme that the prophet’s role is to serve as a physician of the heart, Rāzī argues that prophets are necessary. Indeed, it is his view that

78. Shihadeh notes that in the *Māṭālib* Rāzī posits a similar hierarchy of human souls, classifying them according to their degrees of perfection; Shihadeh, *The Teleological Ethics*, 135.

79. Rāzī, *Mafātiḥ al-ghayb*, 17.115.

God would not design the soul with the potential to fall ill without also sending prophet-physicians to positively influence the soul's intellectual and moral depravity with appropriate treatments. Discussing the illnesses that arise in the soul, Rāzī writes that "it must be the case that these maladies have a proficient physician," thereby implying that God acts by necessity when he dispatches prophets who have the expertise to prescribe the appropriate treatments for the soul's illnesses. Without a proficient spiritual physician, a soul that "falls into a severe malady" will inevitably die. With the right treatment or prescription, however, such a soul can become healthy and its illness cease.<sup>80</sup>



Now that I have described the Avicennian and Ghazālīan background to Rāzī's conception of the prophet's soul, let me explain how he finds these ideas embedded in Qur'ān 10, 58, which reads as follows: *O men, now there has come to you an admonition from your Lord, and a healing for what is in the hearts, and a guidance and a mercy to the believers.* And let me show how, in his view, the Qur'ān's method of reasoning and his rational ideas about the soul's moral and intellectual perfection confirm one another.

For Rāzī, a rational conception of prophecy is implied by the above Qur'ānic verse. In his view, the divine method of reasoning exhibited in Qur'ān 10, 58 provides a model for understanding the prophetic soul's intellectual and moral perfection, since its key terms—admonition, healing, guidance, and mercy—reveal a pattern of reasoning about the soul's intellectual and moral perfection. In his exegesis, Rāzī draws correspondences between these terms and the attributes of the prophet's soul. Indeed, he maintains that such attributes give the prophet's soul the aptitude to perfect the souls of ordinary folk and heal their illnesses of false beliefs and blameworthy morals.

It is Rāzī's view that the Qur'ān outlines the soul's perfection at 10, 58 by describing the various stages of its intellectual and moral development. It is

80. Rāzī's prophetic paradigm also relies on a principle that was shared by the Mu'tazila and Avicenna. It is incumbent on God to act for the benefit of mankind; and God acts in accordance with this principle by sending prophets. By adopting this principle, Rāzī abandons the classical Ash'arite position, which postulated that God could have created men without the need for prophets, and that there is nothing in the divine nature that impels God to send forth prophets.

also his view that when the Qur'ān describes such stages, it presents its ideas logically. Rāzī's interpretation of this verse implies that the Qur'ān arranges its key terms—admonition, healing, guidance, and mercy—according to a pattern of divine reasoning (to borrow Lagarde's terminology) that coincides with discursive reasoning of the human intellect. In Rāzī's methodology, Qur'ān 10, 58 verse proceeds in accordance with the steps of a medical regimen: (a) diagnosis of illness; (b) prescription of medication; (c) application of medicine; (d) attainment of desired result.<sup>81</sup> Let us now examine the correspondences that Rāzī draws between the medical regimen specified by the Qur'ānic terms and the degrees of the soul's perfection.

In the following selection Rāzī discusses the initial rank of the soul:

### i. Admonition

The first rank is that he [Muḥammad] prohibits a person from ingesting what is inappropriate and that he commands him to exercise caution about those things that caused him to be sick, and this is **admonition**. For, "to admonish" means to advise against everything that does not satisfy God and to prohibit everything that occupies the heart other than God.<sup>82</sup>

In the above, Rāzī postulates that at its initial rank, the soul is beset by an acute illness. The soul's initial affliction arises when a person rejects the rituals and practices of outward purity that are commanded by the law and when he ingests what is forbidden by the law. The cure for this illness is specified by the Qur'ānic term *admonition*. Admonition to follow the law is the effective treatment for this illness, since it is the law that provides counsel about pious acts. For Rāzī, the term *admonition* refers to a remedy that the prophet has prescribed for the initial stages of the soul's illness that occurs at its initial stages of intellectual and moral development. The prophet's prescriptions for religious ritual that are outlined in the law prepare a soul to acquire theoretical knowledge and refine its piety.

81. I am grateful to my colleague, Jon McGinnis, for his observations about Rāzī's exegesis of Qur'ān 10, 58.

82. Rāzī, *Mafātih al-ghayb*, 17.116.



## ii. Healing

The soul that has attained a second rank is still tarnished by the imperfections of false beliefs and blameworthy morals. Such beliefs and morals corrupt the soul and prevent it from attaining its goal, which is to acquire knowledge from the suprasensible or intelligible world. In the following selection, Rāzī describes this state of the soul's illness. Further, he explains how the Qur'ānic term, *healing*, designates a remedy that the prophet prescribed for this stage of the soul's intellectual and moral imperfections.

The second rank is **healing**. This refers to the medicine that [the prophet] makes a person take. Such medicine eliminates those corrupt compounds from his insides which made him sick. Likewise the prophets—upon them be peace—when they prohibited people from doing what is forbidden their outward acts became cleansed of what is inappropriate. Then they commanded inward purity, which takes place through the struggle to abandon blameworthy morals and to attain praiseworthy morals. The first among these commands is mentioned in God's words, *Surely God bids to justice and good-doing and giving to kinsmen; and He forbids indecency, dishonor, and insolence, admonishing you, so that haply you will remember* (16, 90). That is because we mentioned that corrupt beliefs and blameworthy morals are like illnesses. If they cease the cure is realized in the heart and the soul's substance becomes pure of all of the marks which prevent it from viewing the [suprasensible] world of Malakūt.<sup>83</sup>

The soul's illness at its second rank is attributed to a lack of correct belief and praiseworthy morals. Corrupt beliefs and blameworthy morals avert the soul from viewing the suprasensible world of ideas and prevent it from achieving its goal, which is to attain theoretical knowledge.

In Rāzī's exegesis, the remedy for a soul that is beset with such imperfections is prescribed by Muḥammad, who in his role as a prophet-physician, specifies the cure for such an affliction. The remedy for this stage of the soul's affliction is embedded in the Qur'ānic word "healing." Rāzī understands the Qur'ānic term *healing* to mean that the Qur'ān prescribes inward acts of purification that enable the soul to "abandon [its] blameworthy morals and [to] attain praiseworthy morals." In Rāzī's view, such acts are specified by the Qur'ānic phrase, *Surely God bids to justice and good-doing and giving to kinsmen; and He forbids indecency, dishonor,*

83. Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 17.116.

and insolence, admonishing you, so that haply you will remember (16, 90). In Rāzī's exegesis, the inward acts that the Qur'ān prescribes for the soul's refinement disclose the Qur'ān's pattern of reasoning about the soul's intellectual and moral development. The divine logic of the Qur'ān that is exhibited in this verse discloses a pattern of reasoning that the Qur'ān employs to describe the soul's intellectual and moral development.

### iii. Guidance

The soul that occupies the third rank of development continues to be tarnished by false doctrines and blameworthy morals. Such imperfections avert the soul from viewing the suprasensible world of ideas. When the soul attains this rank, however, it becomes receptive to the theoretical knowledge that can be attained from the intelligible world. In the following selection, Rāzī posulates that the term *guidance* (10, 58) refers to the remedy that Muḥammad prescribed for this stage of the soul's development:

The third rank is **guidance**. This can only take place after the second type of treatment when the rational soul's substance is receptive to holy clarities, divine lights. The emanation of [God's] mercy is prevalent without interruption, as the prophet said, "Verily your Lord has breaths of His mercy in the days of your time—so expose yourselves to them!" Moreover, obstruction would only be either due to incapacity, ignorance, or stinginess, and all of this is impossible on God's part, so it is impossible that the obstruction is due to Him. In spite of this a person might not attain spiritual lights. Indeed this is only on account of your false doctrines and blameworthy morals, their nature being darkness, and establishment of darkness [in the soul] makes it impossible to attain the light. For if those states cease, then the obstacle is removed, and it must be that the light of the holy world falls on the sanctified soul's substance, and that light means nothing but guidance. For in that state this soul reaches a point such that there is imprinted on it the drawing of Malakūt and there is manifested on it the holiness of Lahūt.<sup>84</sup>

In Rāzī's exegesis, the remedy for a soul whose false doctrines and blameworthy morals obstruct it from viewing the suprasensible world of ideas is

84. Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 17.116. My translation of the prophetic tradition contained in this excerpt relies on Chittick, *In Search of the Lost Heart. Explorations in Islamic Thought*, 349.

blueprinted in the Qur'ānic term *guidance* (10, 58). Rāzī proposes that the Qur'ānic term *guidance* refers to the prophet's instruction that leads the soul to attain theoretical knowledge. By accepting prophetic guidance, the soul turns away from the world of sense perception and views the suprasensible world of intelligibles. When the soul returns to the intelligible world, which is its provenance, the blemishes that obstructed its view of the intelligible world are removed; and the soul becomes imprinted ideas from the suprasensible world.

Rāzī finds a model for the soul's return to the intelligible world in Qur'ānic commands that bid the soul to return to God. In the following selection he shows how Qur'ānic commands serve as a treatment for the soul's affliction. He writes:

The first of this type [of treatment] is God's words, "*O soul at peace, return unto thy Lord*" (89, 27). The second of them is God's words, *Therefore flee unto God!* (51, 50). The third of them is, *Say: "God." Then leave them alone, playing their game of plunging* (6, 91). The summation of them is, *To God belongs the Unseen in the heavens and the earth. To Him the whole matters shall be returned; so serve Him, and put thy trust in Him. Thy Lord is not heedless of the things you do* (11, 123).<sup>85</sup>

In the above selection Rāzī adduces Qur'ānic verses that command the soul to return to God, and he postulates that such verses exemplify types of prophetic guidance. The guidance of the prophet exhorts the soul to avert the world of perception and to behold the world of intelligibles, which he identifies with God's domain on the basis of the Qur'ānic expression "To God belongs the Unseen." Here Rāzī means to imply that the Qur'ān outlines the soul's return to the intelligible world as a remedy for its affliction; and that by doing so, it confirms and reinforces the rational conception that sees the prophet as a physician of the soul.

#### iv. Mercy

In Rāzī's exegesis, the final stage of the soul's development is encapsulated in the Qur'ānic phrase "a mercy for believers" (10, 58). Rāzī correlates the Qur'ānic term *mercy* with the soul's final station (*maqām*) of development.

85. Rāzī, *Mafātih al-ghayb*, 17.116.

His interpretation of this phrase assumes a rationalistic idea that he had argued for in the *Maṭālib* and the *Mabāḥith*: when the soul perfects its theoretical faculty, it receives the forms of things and their true natures without error; and when the soul receives such abstract forms without error, it gains the aptitude to perfect the souls of believers.<sup>86</sup>

Rāzī reserves the final stage of the soul's development for the prophet. He describes this station in *Maṭāṭīḥ al-ghayb* by asserting that when the soul averts the world of sense perception and turns to the suprasensible world of ideas, it reaches the perfection of "spiritual ranks and divine heights." He also contends that the prophet's soul, by undergoing such a "return" to the suprasensible world, "reach[ed] perfection and illumination to the point that it becomes perfecting of those who are deficient." By reaching perfection, the prophet becomes "the perfect man who at the same time perfects [the souls of other believers]."<sup>87</sup>

In Rāzī's exegesis, the Qur'ānic word "mercy" encapsulates this idea by alluding to the unbounded light that the prophet's soul emanates onto the souls of believers, whose afflictions cease when they accept the guidance of prophetic revelation. Rāzī understands the Qur'ānic term mercy to refer to a characteristic of the prophet's soul that positively influences and perfects the souls of believers by guiding them to God. Alongside the other key terms—admonition, healing, and guidance, which Rāzī conceives of as remedies for the soul's intellectual and moral depravity, the Qur'ānic term mercy discloses a Qur'ānic pattern of reasoning that substantiates Muḥammad's status as a skillful physician of the soul.

What salient characteristics of Rāzī's methodology can one extract from his discussion of the prophet's soul? And what conclusions about Rāzī's methodology can one draw from his expositions of the soul/spirit in *Maṭāṭīḥ al-ghayb*?

It is evident that when Rāzī interpreted Qur'ān 10, 58 in *Maṭāṭīḥ al-ghayb*, he relied on a pivotal Avicennian philosophical idea that he had already argued for in his works of *kalām* and *falsafa*. His exegesis of this verse thus exemplifies the way that he transfers Avicennian philosophical ideas across

86. This is first pointed out by Abrahamov in "Religion versus Philosophy," 418.

87. Shihadeh, *The Teleological Ethics*, 137. On the theme of the perfect man, see the entry "ensān-e kāmāl" in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, 8: 457–461 (G. Bowering).

disciplinary boundaries—from his works of *falsafa* and *kalām* into Sunnī *tafsīr*; and it casts light on the course that Rāzī took to construct a conception of the prophet's soul that reconciled ancient and Islamic philosophical ideas about the soul's perfection with Sunnī ideas about prophetic guidance. To accomplish this task—a classic example of the reconciliation of *ʿaqlī* and *naqlī* sciences—Rāzī first discovered a template in the Qurʾān that would meet the needs of his theory of the soul. The methodology exhibited here suggests that the genius of Rāzī lies in his masterful ability to discover such templates, and in the way that he seamlessly integrated ancient and Islamic philosophical ideas to fit such templates.

My overall analysis helps to explain why Rāzī considered the Qurʾān an apparatus to forge his intellectual outlook and why he selected the discipline of scriptural exegesis (rather than the philosophical textbook or theological compendium) the most appropriate vehicle to express the grand synthesis of his philosophical and theological ideas. It is plain that for Rāzī, blueprints for the true nature of the soul, its temporal origination and relation to the body, and its moral and intellectual perfection are embedded in the Qurʾān's method of reasoning or its divine logic (to borrow Lagarde's terminology) that conforms perfectly to the discursive method of human reasoning. For Rāzī, the Qurʾān's method of reasoning discloses the solutions to many of the difficulties that intellectuals before and during his time (especially the *falāsifa* and *mutakallimūn*) had tried to resolve using discursive reasoning. By showing that the solutions to such difficulties have been desposited in the Qurʾān by divine reason, and by showing how rationalistic methods of exegesis can be used to reach them, Rāzī presented his contemporaries with a novel methodology. The new methodology that he established for the Islamic tradition presented an alternative to the usual game of arguments and counterarguments that was typical of the rational sciences in classical Islam.

My analysis also leads to a conclusion about Rāzī's overall methodology that is at variance with Ibn Taymiyya's assessment of it. In chapter three, I argued that Ibn Taymiyya evaluated Rāzī's system of methods through the lens of Islamic Traditionalism; and I argued that his Traditionalist prejudice led him to misconstrue the relationship between rational modes of inquiry and the Qurʾān's method in Rāzī's system of thought. Ibn Taymiyya adduced instances that could lead one to believe that Rāzī, after pouring his confidence in the discursive methods of *kalām* and *falsafa*, renounced his rationalistic

methodology by adopting the Qur'ān's method at the end of his life; and that by recanting his rationalistic methods and works, Rāzī transitioned from heresy to piety on his deathbed.

But the examples that I have analyzed in this chapter provide evidence that Rāzī would have disagreed with the Traditionalist assessment of his methodology. Indeed, the model of the prophet's soul that Rāzī discovers in the Qur'ān suggests that he held a rather pietistic view of the Qur'ān's method—just not one that aligned with Islamic Traditionalism. For Rāzī, the rational proofs, concepts, and principles that ancient and Muslim intellectuals developed are treasures that God deposited in the Qur'ān for human beings to uncover. Moreover, the Qur'ān's method of communicating such ideas is superior to the discursive methods of *kalām* and *falsafa*. Indeed, the Qur'ān conveys rationalistic ideas more effectively than the rational sciences do, since it presents them logically and eloquently. To quote Rāzī's words on his deathbed, the Qur'ān does this by preventing its reader “from becoming absorbed in objections and contradictions. . . which serve only to teach us that human intellects come to nothing in those deep straits and hidden ways.”<sup>88</sup>

88. Street, “The Life and Works of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī,” 136.



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